

Infodemic:

Spread of Covid-19 Related Misinformation to and from the Rhetoric of Willem Engel

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Abstract

This research investigates the transference of misinformation and conspiracy theories related to Covid-19 to and from the rhetoric of Dutch Covid-19 sceptic Willem Engel. It explores the sources of such misinformation, hypothesising that the United States plays an important role. A qualitative approach was employed, consisting of analysing journal articles, book chapters, and online content containing or authored by Engel. The following main research question was addressed: In what way has misinformation—including conspiracy theories—related to Covid-19 spread to and from the rhetoric of Willem Engel and how does this relate to the debate on globalisation vs. Americanisation? This was done through answering three sub-questions on relevant theoretical concepts, the societal impact of Engel's actions in the Netherlands, and exploring connections between Engel and non-Dutch sources of Covid-19 misinformation. The results clearly indicated the presence of information transfer, particularly from the German anti-Covid-19 movement to Engel. Surprisingly, the transfer did not always involve transformation of the cultural product, challenging long-held beliefs within the field of Cultural Transfer. Although evidence supporting direct links between Engel and certain American organisations was inconclusive, similarities in approaches suggest the possibility of information being shared, nonetheless. Additionally, the conclusion places the case study of Engel within the framework of globalisation, emphasising the importance of transnational connections in the spread of misinformation, whilst also highlighting the effects of misinformation on (faith in) democratic governance, the role of social media, and the need to curb the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Keywords: Willem Engel, Covid-19, misinformation, conspiracy theory, Cultural Transfer, Americanisation, globalisation, democratic governance, social media.

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Introduction

Dutch Covid-19 sceptic Willem Engel rose to fame during the first couple of weeks of the 2020 pandemic due to his open scepticism towards government regulations and the virus itself. An important aspect of his climb to fame was the inclusion of misinformation and outright conspiracy theories to—knowingly or unknowingly—sow distrust. Engel’s actions carry weight due to its effects on public health, public safety, and (faith in) democratic governance and examining the sources of his misinformation could help in curtailing these negative effects. Therefore, this research used the case study of Engel to explore in what ways conspiracy theories and other types of misinformation regarding Covid-19 were transferred to the Netherlands, with the initial hypothesis holding that the United States plays a key role. After identifying the sources of certain types of misinformation, the focus turns towards examining the shape this information takes once in the Netherlands. In doing so, this research adds to the debate on globalisation vs. Americanisation within the field of Cultural Transfer, on the one hand—a field of study that researches the transfer or migration of some cultural product from one cultural area to another—whilst also exploring the key aspect of transformation, on the other, which refers to the belief that “any cultural [product] transferred between different cultures . . . undergoes a process of transformation, or re-semanticization, [and] re-interpretation.”¹

The goal of this research is not to exhaustively list the ways in which misinformation has spread to the rhetoric of Engel, nor does it mean to imply that this misinformation—whether related to Covid-19 or not—originates solely in one location. Instead, the aim is to look at a specific case study to explore certain elements that contribute to the spread of misinformation regarding Covid-19 (such as contemporary digital technologies) and what the origin of the misinformation could say about the ongoing debate within the field of Cultural Transfer on globalisation vs. Americanisation, afterwards exploring the wider implications of the found results for the field of Cultural Transfer. Therefore, the question underlying this research is the following: In what way has misinformation—including conspiracy theories—related to Covid-19 spread to and from the rhetoric of Willem Engel and how does this relate to the debate on globalisation vs. Americanisation?

¹ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 2.

Several textual sources were analysed and interpreted, meaning that a qualitative approach was employed. The sources used consisted of journal articles, book chapters as well as Engel's presence online through several websites, social media accounts, and interviews published by alternative media channels. These main sources were then further supplemented by other types of non-academic literature.

To enable answering the main question, three sub-questions will first be answered in three consecutive chapters. Before exploring the case study of Willem Engel in Chapter 2, the needed theoretical information will be reviewed in Chapter 1, answering the sub-question: What are the relevant concepts of cultural transfer, globalisation, Americanisation, misinformation, and conspiracy theory and how can misinformation and conspiracy theories affect or have affected democratic governance? Chapter 2 will explore the second sub-question, namely: Who is Willem Engel, the focus of the Dutch case study, and (in what way) have his actions contributed to societal problems and/or affected people's faith in democratic governance in the Netherlands? Chapter 3 explores what connections there are between Engel and non-Dutch sources of Covid-19 related misinformation, discussing what type of information was shared and thereby answering the third sub-question: What connections are there between Willem Engel and non-Dutch purveyors of Covid-19 related misinformation or conspiracy theories and what type of information—if any—is transferred? Finally, the conclusion will answer the main research question whilst also exploring the implications of the findings for the wider field of Cultural Transfer, providing some ideas for further research, and commenting on the role of social media (companies) in spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Chapter 1. Core Concepts and the Effects of Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation on Democratic Governance

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the relevant concepts of cultural transfer, globalisation, Americanisation, misinformation, and conspiracy theory. Besides providing a definition—or, in some cases, providing an overview of the theoretical discussion on different possible definitions—this chapter will also look at the debate surrounding globalisation vs. Americanisation whilst also exploring the effect of misinformation and conspiracy theories on democratic governance, using the United States to explore this topic. Overall, this leads to the following sub-question: What are the relevant concepts of cultural transfer, globalisation, Americanisation, misinformation, and conspiracy theory and how can misinformation and conspiracy theories affect or have affected democratic governance?

1.2 Cultural Transfer

Cultural transfer refers to the transfer or migration of some cultural product from one cultural area to another – where cultural area refers to a “geographical space having in common one or several languages of communication, a specific communication system and specific values and rituals.”² Importantly, the term cultural transfer can be used to describe both the action of transference as well as the theoretical approach to instances of said transference—therefore, a distinction will be made between ‘cultural transfer’ as the process of transference and ‘Cultural Transfer’ as the theoretical approach. Cultural Transfer was designed to function as a “‘theory of intermediate scope’ to conceptualize certain forms of intercultural processes,” namely, the abovementioned transfer of cultural products between cultural areas.³

This Cultural Transfer was created in the 1980s, with Michael Espagne and Michael Werner at the helm of its inception.⁴ It was created both as a replacement for already existing

² Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 2.

³ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 2.

⁴ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1.

concepts that were deemed unprecise—such as cultural relations, cultural exchanges, and cultural circulations—and as a way of connecting with 1970s and 1980s advances in the fields of “linguistics, anthropology, literary theory and translation studies.”⁵ Since Cultural Transfer was created as a replacement, it mostly stemmed from a place of critique on these earlier concepts; especially the way in which the concept of ‘influence’ was incorporated was considered to be both problematic and vague by Espagne: he and Werner “prioritized the context of perception, that is, the cultural surrounding in which the appropriation of foreign cultural elements takes place.”⁶ What this implies is that Cultural Transfer observes a lesser interest in power dynamics between the transferring agent and the recipient when it comes to who can be responsible for a cultural transfer; this also means that the approach leaves open the possibility to include both transfers from a ‘dominant’ to a ‘weaker’ culture as well as the reverse. Instead, Cultural Transfer is more interested in the effect of the recipient’s culture to which an unfamiliar cultural product is transferred. In fact, the fundamental hypothesis of Cultural Transfer is that “any cultural [product] transferred between different cultures . . . undergoes a process of transformation, or re-semanticization, [and] re-interpretation.”⁷ In other words, the act of transference of a cultural product is theorised to result in that product changing due solely to the recipient’s culture: this change can be either in terms of the product itself, its meaning, or its use (e.g., political or social use).⁸

Cultural Transfer is centred around the notion of agents as the body responsible for circulating cultural products. The term agent can refer to multiple representations, such as “individual persons acting as intercultural mediators, . . . forms of media . . . [or] cultural institutions being part of the cultural diplomacy system.”⁹ Due to the agent-centred approach of Cultural Transfer the focus lies not just on the transfer as such but on the motivation of an agent to transfer a cultural product as well. The motivation, too, can be quite varied, ranging

⁵ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1.

⁶ Matthias Middell qtd. in Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 2.

⁷ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 2.

⁸ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 3.

⁹ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 4.

from emotional, to cultural, economic, or political factors.¹⁰ Finally, even though Cultural Transfer has a lesser interest in power dynamics between agent and recipient cultures, the approach does still acknowledge that transfer is asymmetric—due to said power differences—as well as dynamic, and often reciprocal. When a cultural product is transferred, the expectation is that the transformed product will re-affect the agent’s culture in some way (e.g., introducing other perspectives).¹¹

Although the core of Cultural Transfer has remained relatively unchanged over the years, some alterations or additions have been argued for in light of all sorts of global developments since the 1980s. The most relevant additions for this research are the growing role of digital technologies and the growing understanding of what should be considered as a cultural product. When first developing Cultural Transfer, the items that were considered were mostly ‘traditional’ cultural products such as historical or cultural artefacts, literary materials, language itself in the form of translations, as well as films. Considering the great role of those specialised in the fields of literary studies and history in the inception of the approach, this is a very logical result.¹² Nowadays, the understanding of what constitutes a cultural product has broadened significantly: Manuela Rossini and Michael Toggweiler, for example—both cultural studies scholars—argue that cultural transfer is the movement of “words, concepts, images, persons, animals, commodities, money, weapons, and other things (understood in a broad sense).”¹³ By going beyond the material and including conceptual ‘products,’ Rossini and Toggweiler believe that Cultural Transfer can move beyond studying ‘Culture’ with a capital C to studying the ‘cultural,’ which can also be found outside of the ‘textual’ in the traditional analytical sense—those texts that are ““confined in a volume itself confined to the library.””¹⁴ Subsequently, this move towards the inclusion of conceptual as well as material cultural products would result in Cultural Transfer opening up to become an approach to study the

¹⁰ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 4.

¹¹ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 5.

¹² Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1.

¹³ Manuela Rossini and Michael Toggweiler, “Cultural Transfer: An Introduction,” *Word and Text* IV, no. 2 (December 2014): 5.

¹⁴ Derrida qtd. in Manuela Rossini and Michael Toggweiler, “Cultural Transfer: An Introduction,” *Word and Text* IV, no. 2 (December 2014): 6.

transfer of a cultural product from one culture to the other that includes “analogies, comparisons and . . . *relations*: transplantation, infection, evolution, etc.”¹⁵

The role of the Internet has grown exponentially, and it has affected the representations of the agent-role within Cultural Transfer in the sense that “human and machine agents are increasingly interwoven,” resulting in a shared agent role between humans and machines. The Internet has also contributed to the changing views on the bounds of geographical spaces, since these are no longer as limited as the abovementioned definition of cultural area: it is now possible to share a cultural product world-wide with just one click of a computer mouse from anywhere that has an Internet connection.¹⁶ At the same time, however, the Internet has also made it more difficult to determine the origin of a specific cultural product for the exact reason that anyone with an Internet connection can transfer cultural products.

1.3 Globalisation vs. Americanisation

The definition of globalisation seemingly differs depending not just on the individual scholar’s views but also on the field of research a scholar is active in—with the definition accepted by most in the general public stemming from the field of economics. In this definition, globalisation is “the growth in international exchange of goods, services, and capital” as well as “the increasing levels of integration that characterize economic activity.”¹⁷ Thus, in this particular definition the term globalisation has simply become a synonym for the term internationalisation.

Richard Pells, a scholar specialised in 20th century American cultural history, uses the concept of globalisation as an alternative to ‘cultural imperialism’—a concept that will not be further explored due to the limited scope of the current research—and in opposition to ‘Americanisation’ when discussing cultural conformity; specifically in the form of American culture dictating the new global culture. According to Pells, it is not so much the United States imposing their culture through consumerism and mass media but instead it is “international trends beyond the control of governments everywhere” that cause this shift and therefore

¹⁵Manuela Rossini and Michael Toggweiler, “Cultural Transfer: An Introduction,” *Word and Text* IV, no. 2 (December 2014): 6.

¹⁶ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 4.

¹⁷ “Defining Globalization,” Library of Congress, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://guides.loc.gov/globalization/definition>.

globalisation is the correct concept to use.¹⁸ However, Richard Kuisel, specialised in the Americanisation of Europe, argues for the use of the term Americanisation instead of globalisation because he believes both that it is important to acknowledge the power of the United States and “that Americanization has been a force for significant global change and homogenization.”¹⁹ Kuisel states that as long as something is perceived as American “at the moment of import,” it does not matter whether that something originated in the United States or not.²⁰ On the other hand, Winfried Fluck, who is specialised in American culture, argues for a reconsideration when it comes to what Americanisation denotes. According to Fluck, Americanisation is not just about power dynamics in the sense of American culture being ‘forced’ on other, supposedly weaker, cultures purely because of political or economic gains, saying that this would constitute a “[discussion] of Americanization [that] remains incomplete and unconvincing.”²¹ Instead, Fluck argues that the role of individual people in a recipient culture should also be taken into consideration: people are selective in what cultural products they appropriate and will pick and choose what resonates with them—which is what Fluck refers to as ‘self-Americanisation.’ This does not mean, however, that the United States as a whole becomes irrelevant in the discussion, since there is a “worldwide resonance of American popular culture,” something that needs to be accounted for.²²

To return to globalisation, it has already become clear that the definition of globalisation is somewhat contested and Pells, in his article, does not provide a clear definition of the term, simply stating that “national idiosyncrasies seem[ed] endangered by . . . the emergence of a global culture.”²³ This, along with the belief that “America’s culture is a hybrid,” made up of different imported cultures, as well as the belief that the cultural relationship between the United States and other nations is not a one-way street but a two-way street, is seemingly enough for Pells to justify the use of the term globalisation.²⁴ In the article “Defining

¹⁸ Richard Pells, “Commentary: Who’s Afraid of Steven Spielberg?” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 497.

¹⁹ Richard Kuisel, “Commentary: Americanization for Historians,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 510.

²⁰ Richard Kuisel, “Commentary: Americanization for Historians,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 511.

²¹ Winfried Fluck, “California Blue. Americanization as Self-Americanization,” in *Americanization and Anti-Americanism. The German Encounter with American Culture after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (New York: Berghan Books, 2005), 222.

²² Winfried Fluck, “California Blue. Americanization as Self-Americanization,” in *Americanization and Anti-Americanism. The German Encounter with American Culture after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (New York: Berghan Books, 2005), 223.

²³ Richard Pells, “Commentary: Who’s Afraid of Steven Spielberg?” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 497.

²⁴ Richard Pells, “Commentary: Who’s Afraid of Steven Spielberg?” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 498.

Globalisation,” scholar Jan Aart Scholte—known for his contributions to several fields of study including globalisation—talks about what globalisation is often ‘confused’ with (such as internationalisation, Americanisation, and westernisation) followed by the following definition: “globalisation [is] the spread of transplanetary—and in recent times also more particularly supraterritorial—connections between people.”²⁵ In this definition, it is not so much about economy, the availability of goods and services on a global scale, or the spread of particular social structures—such as capitalism or industrialism.²⁶ Instead, this definition of globalisation places social space at the centre: it is about “reductions in barriers to transworld social contacts” that results in people being able to engage across borders.²⁷

Clearly, different scholars have different opinions when it comes to explaining cultural transfer; either preferring to use the concept of globalisation or Americanisation to describe the role played by the United States—whether actively or passively. Interestingly, the same concepts are also used in different ways. When it comes to the current research, the information provided in Chapter 3 will help determine what concept—and with what definition—is best suited for the case study as discussed in Chapter 2.

1.4 Misinformation, Conspiracy Theories & Their Effect on Democratic Governance

When it comes to the concept of misinformation there is no academic consensus for the full scope of characteristics that should be included in its definition. There is, however, consensus on some of the core characteristics of misinformation with experts defining “misinformation as false and misleading information . . . agree[ing] that pseudoscience and conspiracy theories are misinformation.”²⁸ Less consensus exists “on the importance of intentionality,” with some scholars differentiating *misinformation* from *disinformation* based on whether the falsehood of a statement was intentional (disinformation) or unintentional (misinformation).²⁹ This research will adhere to the broader definition of misinformation in which intentionality is not

²⁵ Jan Aart Scholte, “Defining Globalisation,” *The World Economy* 31, no. 11 (2008): 1478, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9701.2007.01019.x>.

²⁶ Jan Aart Scholte, “Defining Globalisation,” *The World Economy* 31, no. 11 (2008): 1477, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9701.2007.01019.x>.

²⁷ Jan Aart Scholte, “Defining Globalisation,” *The World Economy* 31, no. 11 (2008): 1478, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9701.2007.01019.x>.

²⁸ Sacha Altay et al., “A survey of expert views on misinformation: Definitions, determinants, solutions, and future of the field,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 4, no. 4 (July 2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-119>.

²⁹ Sacha Altay et al., “A survey of expert views on misinformation: Definitions, determinants, solutions, and future of the field,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 4, no. 4 (July 2023): 1; 2, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-119>.

considered—unless it is relevant or necessary to do so. A broad definition of conspiracy theory is that it is “the conviction that a group of actors meets in secret agreement with the purpose of attaining some malevolent goal.”³⁰ The following five characteristics further specify the meaning of the concept, namely, a conspiracy theory: involves a causal connection between “people, objects, or events”; it involves deliberate actions, thereby assigning agency to the actors; at least two people are involved in the conspiracy; the “alleged goals . . . are harmful or deceptive”; and secrecy is a must, as a proven conspiracy *theory* is no longer a theory.³¹ Although these five characteristics have narrowed down the broad definition of what a conspiracy theory is, the concept is still worth further exploration.

According to Kelly Greenhill—an American political scientist who focusses on the politics of information—the term conspiracy theory has become a ‘catchall term’ for many people, used “to describe a broad array of generally outlandish and almost invariably false alleged clandestine plots.”³² This type of conspiracy theory is one that is noticeably false when contemplated by someone with a healthy dose of common sense; some examples include the theory that the earth is flat or that bigfoot is real. However, this description of what a conspiracy theory is, can be “both analytically misleading and politically unhelpful.”³³ As seen above, the term conspiracy theory simply refers to an as of yet unproven theory regarding some sort of conspiracy. Moreover, not all conspiracy theories turn out to be false: take the well-known example of the Watergate Scandal during President Nixon’s term in the 1970s. In this case, the Nixon Administration initially denied the theory of their involvement in the break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters to gain information about their opponents of the Democratic Party only to ultimately be exposed by two journalists of *The Washington Post* as having done exactly that: this was one theory that turned out to be an actual plot.³⁴

³⁰ Jeffrey M. Bale qtd. in Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Mark van Vugt, “Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 6 (November 2018): 770, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618774270>.

³¹ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Mark van Vugt, “Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 6 (November 2018): 771, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618774270>.

³² Kelly Greenhill qtd. in Monica Jimenez, “The Truth About Conspiracy Theories,” *Tufts Now*, September 5, 2019, <https://now.tufts.edu/2019/09/05/truth-about-conspiracy-theories>.

³³ Kelly Greenhill qtd. in Monica Jimenez, “The Truth About Conspiracy Theories,” *Tufts Now*, September 5, 2019, <https://now.tufts.edu/2019/09/05/truth-about-conspiracy-theories>.

³⁴ Kelly Greenhill qtd. in Monica Jimenez, “The Truth About Conspiracy Theories,” *Tufts Now*, September 5, 2019, <https://now.tufts.edu/2019/09/05/truth-about-conspiracy-theories>; Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, “GOP Security Aide Among Five Arrested in Bugging Affair,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 1972, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gop-security-aide-among-five-arrested-in-bugging-affair/2012/06/07/gJQAYTdzKV_story.html.

Conspiracy theories often arise after certain events that cause anxiety or confusion resulting in people wanting some type of reassurance or explanation, even if that explanation is perhaps unlikely or provably false; such events could be a terrorist attack, an economic depression, or a worldwide health emergency. Conspiracy theories are not dangerous by default; however, theories can become dangerous when used by political agents—and otherwise powerful agents with a big reach (such as media outlets)—if they are used for nefarious reasons. Conspiracy theories and misinformation are still being used by politicians—and other agents—nowadays and can therefore still be harmful. As such, besides discussing the definitions of misinformation and conspiracy theory, it is also relevant for the current research to look at the (possible) consequences of the act of sharing misinformation and/or one or more conspiracy theories when it comes to current democratic governance.

Joseph E. Uscinski, an American political scientist specialised in conspiracy theories, talks about the consequences of conspiracy theories for democracies in general, saying that such theories “can drive majorities to make horrible decisions backed by the use of legitimate force,” or contrarywise, “[they can] encourage abstention,” since those who do not believe in a system will be less inclined to act in it.³⁵ Neither of these possibilities are good for the continued existence of a democratic government. Furthermore, Uscinski also specifically mentions the risk conspiracy theories pose to people’s health—since they can inform medical decisions—and the risk of conspiracy theories resulting in violence amongst ‘true believers’ of the misinformation (i.e., people who view the theory as instructions to act out violence). Conspiracy theories and their use within politics, is by no means a new phenomenon—on the contrary, conspiracy theories have been around since ancient Rome. At the same time, however, saying that the use of conspiracy theories nowadays is the same as back then, would be incorrect. Although there is not yet a study that compares contemporary prevalence of conspiracy theories to times past, “countless scholars and journalists are looking to conspiracy theories” in an effort to account for recent affairs: in fact, there is clear evidence that supports the narrative that conspiracy theories are affecting politics on a global scale: “[r]ecent displays of populism, nationalism, xenophobia, and racism are all accompanied by conspiracy narratives” and conspiracy theories have also been used to justify the authoritarian aspirations of world leaders, according to Uscinski.³⁶ One development that has contributed greatly to both

³⁵ Joseph E. Uscinski, “Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

³⁶ Joseph E. Uscinski, “Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

these changes, as well as facilitate the wide spread of conspiracy theories and other misinformation, is the invention and continuing growth of the Internet; and in recent years more particularly the use of social media to quickly distribute (mis)information over a wide geographical area. In fact, the Internet has caused such wide-spread accessibility to conspiracy theories that certain scholars believe that all people believe in at least one—if not more—conspiracy theory.³⁷

When it comes to exploring the effect of conspiracy theories and misinformation on democratic governance, the examples are all set within the United States, with the period looked at will be from around the start of the first election campaign of former President Donald J. Trump to around the inauguration of Joe Biden, Trump's successor as President, both because Trump was President during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and because of Trump's reputation in relation to the use of misinformation. 'Conspiracy candidate' is the nickname former President Trump received during his 2016 election campaign, due to being a "particularly prolific purveyor of a wide array of conspiracy theories."³⁸ Even before Trump started his election campaign he was already known for being a conspiracy theorist, having wanted to prove the conspiracy theory that former President Barack Obama was not born in the United States; Trump did not continue his pursuit to prove this theory during his first election campaign but still insisted that he was "unsure of the president's birthplace" despite this theory already having been proven false at that time.³⁹ During his campaign for the 2016 elections, Trump insinuated that officials were hiding information from the public to do with a then recent attack in San Bernadino that resulted in 14 deaths.⁴⁰ Trump has also made false or dubious claims about the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center multiple times: he used his supposed viewing of thousands of people cheering when the towers fell to first call for the surveillance of mosques in New Jersey and later to call for a ban on Muslims entering the United States and he accused both former President Bill Clinton and George Bush of not having made use of a chance to eliminate Osama Bin Laden before the attacks on 9/11 happened.⁴¹

³⁷ Qtd. in Joseph E. Uscinski, "Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!" in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

³⁸ Kelly Greenhill qtd. in Monica Jimenez, "The Truth About Conspiracy Theories," *Tufts Now*, September 5, 2019, <https://now.tufts.edu/2019/09/05/truth-about-conspiracy-theories>.

³⁹ Benjy Sarlin, "Donald Trump's Long History of Conspiracy Theories," *NBC News*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-s-long-history-conspiracy-theories-n567076>.

⁴⁰ Max Ehrenfreund, "Donald Trump apparently has a brand-new conspiracy theory," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/15/donald-trump-has-a-brand-new-conspiracy-theory/>.

⁴¹ Ryan Bort, "Trump's Bizarre History With 9/11," *Rolling Stone*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-9-11-story-722430/>.

Trump has also spouted several conspiracy theories about Latino immigrants that conglomerated into one big conspiracy theory in which Mexico purposefully sent unsavoury people across the border, implying that the majority of Mexican immigrants are criminals, rapists, and killers—a claim he later broadened to include Latinos that are not from Mexico or Mexican descent as well as Black people.⁴² Some of these conspiracy theories have already resulted in real-life consequences for marginalised groups: when followers took his remarks and acted on them—attacking a homeless Hispanic man—Trump subsequently called his followers ‘passionate’ instead of denouncing what they did.⁴³ Furthermore, Trump continued his plans to build a wall on the Mexico-United States border to keep out ‘criminal’ Latinos.

The abovementioned examples—which reflect just a sample of all that Trump has stated over the years—already show how Trump used conspiracy theories to turn a wider audience against marginalised groups, also resulting in violence against these people, for the simple reason of gaining popularity in an election. Furthermore, the biggest recent attack on democratic governance occurred during the counting of the electoral votes after the 2020 election: the January 6th, 2021, attack on the United States Capitol. Trump’s false allegation that the election had been ‘stolen’ through fraud and that he was the legitimate winner of the presidential election resulted in tens of thousands of people convening—and ultimately breaking into—the Capitol, acting against their government in an insurrection that caused several people to lose their lives as well as many injuries.⁴⁴ At least two forms of violence caused by a conspiracy theory are visible in this example: firstly, it shows how true believers of a conspiracy theory can be incited to use violence; secondly, it shows the consequences of a political actor having access to the use of legitimate force. Although this example shows the consequences of *not* using legitimate force when necessary: the police officers present at the Capitol could not handle the sheer number of insurrectionists and needed backup, something that could be provided by President Trump by means of the “deployment of the National Guard in the District of Columbia . . . [or] any Federal law enforcement agency,” something Trump

⁴² Carolina Moreno, “9 Outrageous Things Donald Trump Has Said About Latinos,” *Huffpost*, November 9, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/9-outrageous-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-latinos_n_55e483a1e4b0c818f618904b.

⁴³ Carolina Moreno, “9 Outrageous Things Donald Trump Has Said About Latinos,” *Huffpost*, November 9, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/9-outrageous-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-latinos_n_55e483a1e4b0c818f618904b.

⁴⁴ Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, *Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, accessed October 15, 2023, 4-5, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/january-6-committee-final-report/2095325cbebd8378/full.pdf>; Chris Cameron, “These Are the People Who Died in Connection With the Capitol Riot,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/us/politics/jan-6-capitol-deaths.html>.

refused to do.⁴⁵ Trump's actions both before and during the insurrection, such as allegedly sending messages via social media that further incited the rioters as well as his inaction in sending backup to the struggling police officers, lend further proof to the rioters that they were acting in the interests of their leader, their "commander-in-chief."⁴⁶

All this is not to say that either left-wing actors or Democrats do not subscribe to or broadcast their own conspiracy theories, often aimed at their opponent(s). Bernie Sanders, for example, a candidate of the Democratic Party, was another politician during the 2016 election campaign who made extensive use of conspiracy theories to try to gain people's support; the only difference was the nature of the conspiracy theories and who they implicated. Sanders accused the Democratic National Committee of rigging the primaries in Hilary Clinton's favour and made claims about the concentration of wealth in the United States, calling the economy 'rigged'—whilst this was true to a certain extent, Sanders unquestionably exaggerated the facts.⁴⁷ Democrats as a whole have also partaken in the spread of conspiracy theories to fight against an outcome they did not agree with: starting out by stating the election would not be rigged in response to Trump, they soon changed their tune "after Trump's surprising victory, . . . [deciding] that the election had been rigged—by Trump and his family, Vladimir Putin, Russian hackers, WikiLeaks, fake news, social media outlets, James Comey, the FBI, the RT Channel, and third-party candidates."⁴⁸

Still, a widely held belief amongst right-wing political actors and Republicans is that left-wing political actors are the biggest perpetrators of spreading misinformation via social media; this turns out not to be the case, but instead is simply yet another conspiracy theory.⁴⁹ This everlasting back and forth where conspiracy theories are used to rebut other conspiracy theories results in "an information environment that is at best unclear and at worst

⁴⁵ Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, *Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, accessed October 15, 2023, 6-7, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/january-6-committee-final-report/2095325cbebd8378/full.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, *Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, accessed October 15, 2023, 3, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/january-6-committee-final-report/2095325cbebd8378/full.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Joseph E. Uscinski, "Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!" in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7-8.; C. Eugene Emery Jr., "Bernie Sanders exaggerates concentration of wealth, income for top 1 percent," PolitiFact, February 4, 2016, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/feb/04/bernie-s/bernie-sanders-exaggerates-concentration-wealth-in/>.

⁴⁸ Joseph E. Uscinski, "Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!" in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6.

⁴⁹ Anthony R. DiMaggio, "Conspiracy Theories and the Manufacture of Dissent: QAnon, the 'Big Lie', Covid-19, and the Rise of Rightwing Propaganda, *Critical Sociology* 48, no. 6 (2022): 1038, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211073669>.

incomprehensible.”⁵⁰ Moreover, the specific widely held belief that left-wing radicals use social media to spread misinformation has the added negative consequence of “[relieving] social media venues of responsibility for enabling the rise of rampant conspiratorialism,” due to less pressure from the general public to act against this type of misinformation or their purveyors.⁵¹

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored several relevant concepts whilst also discussing both the broader debate surrounding globalisation vs. Americanisation and the effect that misinformation and/or conspiracy theories can have—or have had—on democratic governance in the United States.

Overall, it has become clear that all concepts relevant for this research are either ever-evolving or have multiple definitions, depending on who defines them. Cultural Transfer has changed overtime to account for changes caused by all kinds of developments: particularly technological developments. At its core, however, it is still about an agent of some kind transferring a cultural product from one area to another in which the cultural product undergoes a process of transformation due to the recipient’s culture. When it comes to the globalisation vs. Americanisation debate to explain cultural transfer, it has become clear that scholars differ in opinion on what concept fits best. As mentioned above, the findings discussed in Chapter 3 will help determine what concept fits best for the current case study. Finally, there were the concepts of misinformation and conspiracy theory as well as their effect on democratic governance. Especially ‘conspiracy theory’ is a concept whose meaning changes depending on whether one asks the general public or a scholar specialised in the topic. The result of this can be “both analytically misleading and politically unhelpful,” to reiterate Kelly Greenhill.⁵² Furthermore, the fact that conspiracy theories should be regarded carefully and cannot be ignored has become clear when considering the effects they—and other kinds of misinformation—have had on democratic governance in the United States recently—with the biggest attack on democratic governance being the attack on the Capital on January 6th, 2021.

⁵⁰ Joseph E. Uscinski, “Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6.

⁵¹ Anthony R. DiMaggio, “Conspiracy Theories and the Manufacture of Dissent: QAnon, the ‘Big Lie’, Covid-19, and the Rise of Rightwing Propaganda,” *Critical Sociology* 48, no. 6 (2022): 1038, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211073669>.

⁵² Kelly Greenhill qtd. in Monica Jimenez, “The Truth About Conspiracy Theories,” *Tufts Now*, September 5, 2019, <https://now.tufts.edu/2019/09/05/truth-about-conspiracy-theories>.

The next chapter will continue to explore conspiracy theories, misinformation, and their effects but instead of looking at the United States the next chapter will turn towards a case study in the Netherlands. Namely, the case of Willem Engel: who is he? What role does or did he play in the Dutch landscape when it comes to Covid-19 and what consequences did or could this have?

Chapter 2. Willem Engel and the Case of Sudden Fame through Spreading (Mis)information

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will address the second sub-question which goes as follows: Who is Willem Engel, the focus of the Dutch case study, and (in what way) have his actions contributed to societal problems and/or affected people's faith in democratic governance in the Netherlands? The chapter is divided into three sections, where the first section discusses Engel's background as well as his organisation 'Viruswaarheid' ('Virus Truth'); the second section focusses on how he became (in)famous within the Dutch landscape; and the third section deals with the societal and legal consequences of Engel's actions and what impact this had—or continues to have—on democratic governance in the Netherlands.

2.2 Willem Engel: Co-founder of Viruswaarheid

Willem Engel is a "Dance teacher, Scientist, [and] Human rights activist," according to his own social media; others, such as communication scientist Judith Möller, would argue he is a conspiracy theorist.⁵³ Engel, who was born in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1977 and now lives in Rotterdam, has been a dance teacher by profession since 2008.⁵⁴ This is the same year Engel decided to quit his doctoral research degree (PhD) in the field of analytical bioscience that he was pursuing at Leiden University—important to note is that aerosols were his area of interest.⁵⁵ Before starting his PhD, Engel successfully completed a degree in biopharmaceutical sciences at Leiden University and combining the years spent on this finished degree with the years spend on his unfinished PhD amounts for about 12 years spend in the field of biopharmaceuticals. When looking at the details of his life so far, it is difficult to imagine why he became the voice of reason for many Covid-19 sceptics in the Netherlands: although Engel completed a degree within the field of biopharmaceuticals, he was not employed in this field, nor did he make any contributions that would suggest a continued level of interest or an attempt

⁵³ Engel, Willem (@dancalegria), *X page*, <https://twitter.com/dancalegria>; Judith Möller qtd. in Maarten van Gestel, "Wetenschapper, 'sekteleider' of 'megamafklapper': Wie is Willem Engel?" *Trouw*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/wetenschapper-sekteleider-of-megamafklapper-wie-is-willem-engel~b44dd0f0/>.

⁵⁴ "Willem Engel," *Follow the Money*, accessed November 24, 2023, <https://www.ftm.nl/tag/willem-engel>.

⁵⁵ Pepijn van Erp, "Het 'alternatieve RIVM' van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat," *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

to keep up to date with developments in said field. Moreover, Engel initially did not disapprove of government stipulations and, according to journalist Maarten van Gestel, even closed his dance school before the government implemented the ‘intelligent lockdown’ (i.e., a form of lockdown that is less severe than a full lockdown without, for example, a curfew and with less strict rules on when one is allowed outside).⁵⁶

During the first intelligent lockdown Engel ‘re-discovered’ his earlier interest in biopharmaceuticals and went looking for information; he quickly concluded that he no longer agreed with government regulations and completely turned against both the government and the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), forming an action group called ‘Viruswaanzin’ (‘Virus Madness’) together with jurist Jeroen S. Pols and subsequently opening a website by the same name. Quickly thereafter, on June 11, 2020, the two set up a foundation to continue sharing their beliefs whilst now having the ability to raise funds: this foundation received the name ‘Viruswaarheid.nl’ (‘Virus Truth’).⁵⁷ Engel subsequently started spreading his opinions and referring people to his site via his personal social media account as early as June 13, 2020, sharing a message on X (formerly known as Twitter) in which he called for people to sign a petition against the lockdown.⁵⁸ This was not, however, the first time Engel publicly addressed his feelings towards government regulations. On May 29, 2020, Engel was a guest at the talk show ‘Café Weltschmerz’ hosted on YouTube. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, this platform already had a negative reputation: it was known for inviting guests portraying radical views, for spreading conspiracy theories, and for their distrust in certain institutions—underlined by their tagline which translates to “the government and mainstream media do not tell the whole story.”⁵⁹ By June 18, 2020, the episode with Engel had already been viewed more than 238.000 times.⁶⁰ This interview was followed by multiple other interviews over the course of about two weeks; although, the majority of these interviews were

⁵⁶ Maarten van Gestel, “Wetenschapper, ‘sekteleider’ of ‘megamaflapper’: Wie is Willem Engel?” *Trouw*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/wetenschapper-sekteleider-of-megamaflapper-wie-is-willem-engel~b44dd0f0/>.

⁵⁷ Rechtbank Amsterdam, “ECLI:NL:RBAMS:2021:2851,” *De Rechtspraak*, June 2, 2021, <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBAMS:2021:2851>.

⁵⁸ Willem Engel (@danclegria), “PETITIE – STOP DE LOCKDOWN! #corona #lockdown #vrijheid #21juni2020 viruswaanzin.nl/petitie-stop-d...,” X, June 21, 2020, <https://x.com/danclegria/status/1271897531396603905?s=20>.

⁵⁹ “Home,” Café Weltschmerz, accessed November 27, 2023, <https://www.cafeweltschmerz.nl/>; Wilmer Heck, “Café Weltschmerz bidet systeemkritiek en soms een complottheorie,” *NRC*, December 20, 2019, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/12/20/cafeweltschmerz-geen-complottheorie-maar-systeemkritiek-a3984555>; Rob Vreeken, “Bij Café Weltschmerz ziet de wereld er heel anders uit,” *De Volkskrant*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/bij-cafeweltschmerz-ziet-de-wereld-er-heel-anders-uit~b8261bb4/>.

⁶⁰ Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanzin>.

not broadcast on mainstream media since they wanted nothing to do with Engel or his beliefs.⁶¹ Furthermore, Engel was convinced of the conspiracy theory that mainstream media and the government were working together to keep dissenting opinions under wrap.⁶² Café Weltschmerz introduced Engel as an Analytical Bioscientist and Engel was seemingly invited due to his opposition to government regulations, which in turn were largely based on his experience within the field of biopharmaceuticals.⁶³ The fact that Engel was referred to as a scientist is relevant because it influenced how people received his words: multiple people left comments underneath the first Café Weltschmerz interview where they stated Engel's occupation as scientist had helped convinced them of his words.⁶⁴ Although Engel had been active in the field of biopharmaceuticals for some twelve years, he had also been inactive for twelve years since leaving the academic world behind in 2008 and research has shown that memory decays over time—even information that is more familiar (such as study materials) is susceptible to decay.⁶⁵ It could therefore be inferred that some of his knowledge on biopharmaceuticals had decayed—a topic that will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

2.3 Route to Becoming (In)famous

In the words of molecular cell biology professor Dan Larhammar—who is also the chair of an All European Academies (ALLEA) project related to pseudoscience and science disinformation—“science disinformation is a term used not only for different types of distortion of scientific facts but also attacks on science in order to undermine trust, for instance by spreading contradictory information, weaving conspiracy theories, questioning expertise, spreading false rumours about science and scientists, etc.”⁶⁶ Important to note, is that ALLEA's definitions for misinformation vs. disinformation in relation to science differ in that one includes intentionality whilst the other does not—where misinformation is equated to simple

⁶¹ Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanzin>.

⁶² Paul Verspeek, “Willem Engel, de rattenvanger van Hamelen in corona-land,” Rijmond, November 29, 2020, <https://www.rijnmond.nl/nieuws/201576/willem-engel-de-rattenvanger-van-hamelen-in-coronaland>.

⁶³ Café Weltschmerz, “Een crisis in de wetenschap, lockdown is een schande. Willem Engel en Ramon Brill,” YouTube video, May 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-2in_Z66F8.

⁶⁴ Café Weltschmerz, “Een crisis in de wetenschap, lockdown is een schande. Willem Engel en Ramon Brill,” YouTube video, May 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-2in_Z66F8.

⁶⁵ Timothy Ricker et al., “Do Familiar Memory Items Decay?” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 46, no. 1 (January 2020): 74, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xlm0000719>.

⁶⁶ Dan Larhammar qtd. in “Defending Truth: From Pseudo-Science to Science Disinformation,” September 14, 2020, <https://allea.org/defending-truth-from-pseudo-science-to-science-disinformation/>.

mistakes. Even so, science disinformation as defined above does still fall within the broader definition of misinformation as used in this research.⁶⁷ As this section will show, both the term science misinformation and disinformation can be applied to describe Engel’s actions, which subsequently led to his becoming (in)famous in the Netherlands as a prominent Covid-19 sceptic.

Engel made several claims related to Covid-19 during the abovementioned interview at Café Weltschmerz, namely that the epidemic in the Netherlands had already passed, that neither the RIVM’s tests nor their models were correct, that the 1.5-meter distance the government had implemented was not based on reliable information, and that only 25 percent of the population would be infected to begin with.⁶⁸ Engel—along with co-founder Pols—went a step further in his quest to put an end to the Covid-19 regulations and decided to file summary proceedings (i.e., “a non-jury legal process that resolves a dispute or case quickly and efficiently”⁶⁹) against both the Dutch government and the RIVM.⁷⁰ Within the announcement of their legal actions Engel and Pols made even more bold claims, such as accusing the RIVM of not just withholding but also of actively falsifying the results that were subsequently used to ‘misinform’ the House of Representatives leading to unnecessary harsh regulations meant to curb the spread of Covid-19—a conspiracy theory not based on any supporting evidence whatsoever.⁷¹

As stated in section 2.1, Engel’s focus during his PhD was aerosols and this is also what Engel focused on when arguing against the government mandated 1.5-meter distance. Some additional information about aerosols is essential to understand Engel’s argumentation. A broad definition of aerosols is that they are “small particles suspended in the atmosphere . . . often not or barely visible to the human eye.”⁷² Aerosols are relevant in different fields of study and the term can therefore refer to different particles: in atmospheric science, for example, some of the relevant natural particles are “[s]ea spray, mineral dust, smoke, and volcanic ash,” whilst

⁶⁷ ALLEA, “Fact or Fake? Tackling Science Disinformation,” *ALLEA Discussion Paper 5* (May 2021): 3, DOI: 10.26356/fact-or-fake.

⁶⁸ Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

⁶⁹ “Summary proceeding,” LSD.Law, accessed November 28, 2023, <https://www.lsd.law/define/summary-proceeding#>.

⁷⁰ Binnenlandredactie, “Viruswaanin.nl eist in kort geding einde van coronamaatregelen,” *AD*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/viruswaanin-nl-eist-in-kort-geding-einde-van-coronamaatregelen~aa2cf02d/>; Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

⁷¹ Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

⁷² A. Chen, B. Howl and A. Sidel, “Aerosols and Their Importance,” NASA Earth Sciences, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://earth.gsfc.nasa.gov/climate/data/deep-blue/aerosols>.

aerosols “emitted by human activities,” such as sulphates or nitrates, are particularly relevant for environmental science as well atmospheric science.⁷³ However, when discussing aerosols within the context of respiratory viruses, such as Covid-19, the term aerosols refers to the very small droplets that are released when a person speaks, sneezes, coughs, sings or breathes normally. These very small droplets *can* contain enough of a virus to become infectious, and these infectious aerosols could subsequently potentially lead to aerogenic transmission of a disease (i.e., indirect infection via floating droplets suspended in the air, which is even possible after the infected person has left). Besides transmission via aerosols, there is also the possibility of transmission via bigger droplets that are released from someone’s respiratory tract when speaking, sneezing, coughing, or singing—but not when breathing normally. Both aerosols and the bigger droplets can lead to transmission of a disease either directly (e.g., shaking hands) or indirectly (e.g., via doorhandles or aerogenic transmission).⁷⁴ Engel claimed that the bigger droplets were not responsible for the transmission of Covid-19 and instead argued that transmission happened *only* via aerosols.⁷⁵ During one of his interviews Engel stated that he “[did] not believe in [droplets released during] sneezing and coughing anymore. [Covid-19] does not originate from your mucous membranes.”⁷⁶ Noteworthy is that neither the RIVM nor the World Health Organization (WHO) or the Centrum for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) denied that aerosols could play a role in the spread of the disease. However, the consensus—both then and now—was that the spread of the disease happened mostly via the bigger droplets when in close contact with someone, meaning within 1 to 2 meters.⁷⁷ Both the distance and the focus on bigger droplets was based on scientific research, but Engel refused to accept this.

Besides claiming only aerosols could spread the disease, Engel also questioned the lack of recent studies researching Covid-19, spread via bigger droplets, and the subsequent distancing regulations. The fact that Covid-19 was a very new disease, which meant that it was farfetched to have a wealth of completed studies, was left unmentioned. Moreover, regulations

⁷³ A. Chen, B. Howl and A. Sidel, “Aerosols and Their Importance,” NASA Earth Sciences, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://earth.gsfc.nasa.gov/climate/data/deep-blue/aerosols>.

⁷⁴ “Aerogene transmissie SARS-CoV-2,” Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, last modified December 21, 2021, <https://lci.rivm.nl/aerogene-transmissie-sars-cov-2>.

⁷⁵ Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

⁷⁶ Willem Engel qtd. in Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>. [Translated from Dutch].

⁷⁷ “Aerogene transmissie SARS-CoV-2,” Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, last modified December 21, 2021, <https://lci.rivm.nl/aerogene-transmissie-sars-cov-2>.

were still based on scientific research.⁷⁸ The focus on bigger droplets was based on the number of virus particles an aerosol droplet can hold due to its size—which is decidedly less than what a bigger droplet can hold—and its subsequent supposed (lesser) ability to spread a virus.⁷⁹ Additionally, the distance regulations were also based on scientific research; one example of such a study being the research done by William F. Wells in the 1930s. Wells, who was an American scientist, conducted an experimental study focussing on the role of droplets in the spread of tuberculosis and he was the first to find that smaller and bigger sized droplets behaved differently. Bigger droplets, during the process of being expelled from someone’s respiratory tract, fell to the floor (or the nearest flat surface) within 1 to 2 meters, whilst smaller droplets evaporated before reaching the floor, leaving their nuclei—that potentially carry parts of a virus—airborne for a longer stretch of time: this study created the rule of thumb still relevant today when it comes to keeping distance, whilst new research into this topic is ever ongoing.⁸⁰ However, when Engel was questioned on said existing research performed by Wells during one of his YouTube interviews he seemingly suggested that Wells’ research no longer held any value due to its age.⁸¹ When it was subsequently pointed out that newer research existed that also supported the 1.5-meter distance, Engel dismissed it due to his distrust of the journal in which it was published; apparently, both the journal and the WHO, who had funded the research, had been deemed by Engel as ‘suspicious.’⁸² The study in question found that “[t]ransmission of viruses was lower with a physical distancing of 1 m or more, compared with a distance of less than 1 m.”⁸³

In determining whether Engel’s argumentation was correct when it came to aerosols, one argument that can be made in favour of Engel is that confusion did exist due to differing definitions for concepts such as “aerosol, spread, and aerogenic transmission” which could have influenced Engel’s beliefs surrounding aerosols.⁸⁴ However, whether Covid-19 can be

⁷⁸ Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

⁷⁹ Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

⁸⁰ William Firth Wells, “ON AIR-BORNE INFECTION: STUDY II. DROPLETS AND DROPLET NUCLEI,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 20, no. 3 (November 1934), 611-618, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.aje.a118097>.

⁸¹ “Russische criminelen verkopen nep-coronamedicijnen aan Nederlandse coronasceptici,” Pointer, March 21, 2022, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/Russische-criminelen-nep-medicijnen-coronasceptici-ivermectine>.

⁸² Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

⁸³ Derek K. Chu et al., “Physical distancing, face masks, and eye protection to prevent person-to-person transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and Covid-19: a systemic review and meta-analysis,” *The Lancet* 395, no. 10242 (June 2020): 1973, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31142-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31142-9).

⁸⁴ “Aerogene transmissie SARS-CoV-2,” Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, last modified December 21, 2021, <https://lci.rivm.nl/aerogene-transmissie-sars-cov-2>. [Translated from Dutch].

spread via aerosols does not automatically negate the fact that Covid-19 can also be spread via bigger droplets—thus, by completely excluding the role played by bigger droplets, Engel was still demonstrably wrong in his argumentation despite having been right in saying that aerosols played a role.⁸⁵ Furthermore, even if the role of bigger droplets in transmitting and spreading the virus is dismissed, this still does not mean that the entirety of the regulations in place in June 2020 (i.e., the period when Engel called on others to protest the lockdown and the timeframe during which he filed summary proceedings against the government to drop *all* Covid-19 regulations) were useless or unnecessary. Besides the already mentioned 1.5-meter distance rule, the government had advised people to work from home whenever possible, to avoid places with a lot of people, to stay at home when experiencing symptoms connected to Covid-19, to sneeze and cough with appropriate hygiene, and to wash one’s hands regularly. Starting on June 1, 2020, wearing a mask in public transport became mandatory due to the impossibility of keeping enough distance and staying quarantined at home when either oneself or a housemate displayed symptoms remained mandatory.⁸⁶ Many of these regulations would also contribute to restrict the spread of the disease if it were only spread via aerogenic transmission: when there is no contact with the outside world at all during one’s illness, it is very unlikely that the virus will be transmitted to someone else.⁸⁷ It can thus be said that Engel used misinformation—or, at the very least, incomplete information—to fight against Covid-19 regulations. Engel’s alternative to protecting oneself from the virus consisted of using “high dosages of vitamin C and D [along with] many hugs, exercise and meditation” to boost one’s immune system.⁸⁸ This means that Engel first used misinformation to contest the regulations put in place by the government subsequently followed by providing alternatives not based in scientific fact that actively endangered people by encouraging them to hug, increasing the likelihood of them contracting and spreading Covid-19.

⁸⁵ “Aerogene transmissie SARS-CoV-2,” Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, last modified December 21, 2021, <https://lci.rivm.nl/aerogene-transmissie-sars-cov-2>.

⁸⁶ “Juni 2020: Versoepeling coronamaatregelen en testen voor iedereen,” Rijksoverheid, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn/juni-2020-versoepeling-coronamaatregelen-en-testen-voor-iedereen#:~:text=Onderwerpen%20Coronavirus%20tijdlijn-,Juni%202020%3A%20Versoepeling%20coronamaatregelen%20en%20testen%20voor%20iedereen,1%20juni%20zich%20laten%20testen.>

⁸⁷ “Aerogene transmissie SARS-CoV-2,” Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, last modified December 21, 2021, <https://lci.rivm.nl/aerogene-transmissie-sars-cov-2>.

⁸⁸ Pepijn van Erp, “Het ‘alternatieve RIVM’ van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat,” *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanzin>. [Translated from Dutch].

Besides the claims about aerosols discussed above, Engel has made several other claims or statements that are either demonstrably false or that show Engel's lacking understanding, two of which will be discussed in some detail. Firstly, there is the example of Engel seemingly not fully grasping the difference between R_0 and R_t , which became apparent during his interview with Café Weltschmerz. The essential difference between the two concepts is as follows: " R_0 is the average number of secondary cases generated by an average infected person . . . *in a wholly susceptible population*," meaning there is no immunity at all (i.e., not through group immunity by means of earlier infections nor through vaccines); R_t , on the other hand, refers to "the average number of secondary cases generated by one infected person *during the epidemic*."⁸⁹ R_t is susceptible to change "[e]ven in an unconstrained epidemic" since group immunity through earlier infections increases automatically, meaning that the number of people susceptible to a new infection lessens over time.⁹⁰ Engel's misunderstanding of the concepts resulted in an unfair disparagement of professionals who did understand the differences, whilst also adding to the already existing scepticism and distrust aimed at said professionals amongst the viewers of the interview.⁹¹ Although this example seems to be a moment of unintentionally sharing incorrect information, this still falls under the definition of misinformation as defined in this research. Secondly, Engel claimed that "the Covid-19 virus, in terms of its threat to public health, differs just slightly from your average flu epidemic. That is for certain."⁹² However, this is demonstrably false: when comparing the number of people in intensive care units (ICUs) due to respiratory problems in March 2020 (i.e., first Covid-19 wave) with the number of people in ICUs during one of the Netherlands' worst flu epidemics of recent years (2018), we see more than twice as many people in ICUs in March 2020. According to numbers of the National Intensive Care Evaluation (NICE) the highest total of people admitted to the ICU as a result of the flu epidemic of 2018 was 350,⁹³ compared to 746 newly admitted people

⁸⁹ The Royal Society, "Reproduction number (R) and growth rate (r) of the COVID-19 epidemic in the UK: methods of estimation, data sources, causes of heterogeneity, and use as a guide in policy formation," August 20, 2020: 7; 9, <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/set-c/set-covid-19-R-estimates.pdf>. [Emphasis added].

⁹⁰ The Royal Society, "Reproduction number (R) and growth rate (r) of the COVID-19 epidemic in the UK: methods of estimation, data sources, causes of heterogeneity, and use as a guide in policy formation," August 20, 2020: 9, <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/set-c/set-covid-19-R-estimates.pdf>. [Emphasis added].

⁹¹ Pepijn van Erp, "Het 'alternatieve RIVM' van Willem Engel en zijn strijd tegen de staat." *Follow the Money*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/willem-engel-viruswaanin>.

⁹² Willem Engel qtd. in Binnenlandredactie, "Viruswaanin.nl eist in kort geding einde van coronamaatregelen," *AD*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/viruswaanin-nl-eist-in-kort-geding-einde-van-coronamaatregelen~aa2cf02d/>. [Translated from Dutch].

⁹³ NICE qtd. in Marcia Nieuwenhuis and Cyril Rosman, "Waarom de griepgolf van 2018 vooralsnog dodelijker was en we ons nu toch meer zorgen moeten maken," *AD*, March 27, 2020,

who were confirmed to have Covid-19 in the period of 23 to 29 March 2020.⁹⁴ Additionally, there were already signs in March 2020 that Covid-19 would likely result in a greater excess mortality than the flu epidemic of 2018, with sociologist Tanja Traag (of the Central Bureau of Statistics, an institution that keeps track of excess mortality rate, amongst other things) stating that there was an “average of 75 deaths per day” during the 2018 flu epidemic, which was “similar to or *lower* than deaths per day caused by Covid-19” at that point in time (i.e., March 27, 2020).⁹⁵ Later research by the Central Bureau of Statistics—when more data was available to make a more accurate comparison to the 2018 flu epidemic—confirmed this.⁹⁶ Add to that the fact that no one had any form of defence against Covid-19, neither due to previous exposure nor due to a vaccine, and the complete picture clearly shows that the disease was indeed worse than your average flu epidemic, unlike Engel’s claims.

Lastly, although the examples mentioned are mostly instances of Engel spreading misinformation—instead of conspiracy theories—one needs to be aware of Engel’s beliefs that underlie his actions, namely his distrust of government that is based on a conspiracy theory akin to the ‘deep state’ conspiracy theory that revolves around believing in the existence of a network within the government that works independent from the government to achieve its own goals.⁹⁷ Therefore, it could be argued that Engel’s actions are (partially) the result of a conspiracy theory.

2.4 Willem Engel and the Consequences of Misinformation

When it comes to societal consequences, Engel’s individual actions may seemingly not have had a direct impact—after all, his actions could be boiled down to having a presence on the

<https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/waarom-de-griepgolf-van-2018-vooralsnog-dodelijker-was-en-we-ons-nu-toch-meer-zorgen-moeten-maken~adf64efb/>.

⁹⁴ “COVID-19 infecties op de IC’s 2020 – 2022,” Nationale Intensive Care Evaluatie, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.stichting-nice.nl/covid-19-op-de-ic-history.jsp>.

⁹⁵ Tanja Traag qtd. in Marcia Nieuwenhuis and Cyril Rosman, “Waarom de griepgolf van 2018 vooralsnog dodelijker was en we ons nu toch meer zorgen moeten maken,” *AD*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/waarom-de-griepgolf-van-2018-vooralsnog-dodelijker-was-en-we-ons-nu-toch-meer-zorgen-moeten-maken~adf64efb/>. [Translated from Dutch; emphasis added].

⁹⁶ Lenny Stoeldraijer, Tanja Traag and Carel Harmsen, “Oversterfte tijdens eerste golf corona-epidemie bij dubbel zo hoog als tijdens griep-epidemie,” CBS, May 21, 2021, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2021/oversterfte-tijdens-eerste-golf-corona-epidemie-bijna-dubbel-zo-hoog-als-tijdens-griep-epidemie?onpage=true>.

⁹⁷ Lijst 30 #hartvoorvrijheid, “Willem Engel – Mensen ontdekken dat de overheid helemaal niet zo betrouwbaar is,” YouTube video, 1:31, March 16, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COR5kIqoVEo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COR5kIqoVEo;).; “Deep State in the US: What is the conspiracy theory and what has Donald Trump said?” *The Standard*, accessed January 18, 2024, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/us-politics/deep-state-us-conspiracy-theory-donald-trump-b1017543.html>.

Internet. However, looking from a wider perspective it can be said that Engel's actions have had societal consequences. Most prominent are the several protests organised by Engel on behalf of Viruswaarheid. Engel announced the first protest, to be held on June 21, 2020, at the Malieveld, The Hague, via his Facebook page, subsequently sharing the link to this video announcement on his X page.⁹⁸ The municipality of The Hague—where large-scale protests typically take place due to it being the city where the government resides—initially barred the protest from taking place due to the greater than indicated number of expected participants and the resulting impossibility of keeping a 1.5-meter distance that came with it. However, Engel responded in a way that implied his followers should ignore the lack of permission and gather nonetheless, even if this was not explicitly stated.⁹⁹ In the end, a number of people refused to adhere to the protest ban and showed up at the Malieveld resulting in the police arresting multiple followers of Viruswaarheid on the morning of June 21.¹⁰⁰ The mayor then decided to allow a short demonstration, since the number of people gathered had grown into the thousands—but at that point further problems had already started brewing: football supporters had decided to join in and their intentions were far from peaceful, their presence ultimately resulting in a riot.¹⁰¹ This resulted in the police having to use a watercannon as well as having to mobilise the riot squad to clear the area, and at the end of the day some 400 arrests had been made.¹⁰² The societal consequences stemming from this protest—and the various similar protests that followed over the course of the pandemic—are multifaceted. There are two distinct groups that had to deal with the direct consequences, namely, the police involved, and some of the inhabitants of The Hague: although police officers were acting in their official capacity, the disregard both protestors and rioters had for keeping a 1.5-meter distance endangered the officers, making them more susceptible to contracting Covid-19 due to the

⁹⁸ Willem Engel (@dancalegria), “Live Video Willem Engel of Facebook 16 juni “Help ons om er een fantastisch feest van te maken op 21 juni #Malieveld” #viruswaanzin facebook.com/watch/live/?v=...”, X, June 17, 2020, <https://x.com/dancalegria/status/1273180034170314753?s=20>.

⁹⁹ Willem Engel (@dancalegria), “We hebben zojuist te horen gekregen van de Gemeente Den Haag dat de demonstratie ‘verboden’ zou worden. Zoals ik vanaf het begin af aan heb gezegd... LIEFDE, GEDULD ... en in dit geval VERTROUWEN. [...] Wij zullen zondag as. de VRIJHEID vieren [...] #viruswaanzin,” X, June 19, 2020, <https://x.com/dancalegria/status/1273888325397557249?s=20>.

¹⁰⁰ Flóri Hofman, “Meer demonstranten Malieveld, sfeer ‘slaat om,’” *NRC*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/06/20/coronablog-21-juni-a4003497>.; “Onrustige dag in Den Haag na betoging op Malieveld: 400 aanhoudingen,” *NOS Nieuws*, June 21, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2337992-onrustige-dag-in-den-haag-na-betoging-op-malieveld-400-aanhoudingen>.

¹⁰¹ Flóri Hofman, “Meer demonstranten Malieveld, sfeer ‘slaat om,’” *NRC*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/06/20/coronablog-21-juni-a4003497>.

¹⁰² Maartje Geels, “Politie zet waterkanon in na demonstratie op Malieveld,” *NRC*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/06/20/coronablog-21-juni-a4003497>.; Jurriaan van Eerten, “Politie Den Haag: vierhonderd arrestaties verricht,” *NRC*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/06/20/coronablog-21-juni-a4003497>.

close contact—a danger that is not normally part of the potential risks a police officer can expect (e.g., rioters intentionally initiating violence against the police is not unheard of);¹⁰³ then, even though a select few residents may benefit from protests (e.g., owners of restaurant near the protest site) a bigger percentage of inhabitants of The Hague were negatively affected in the sense that they were forced to experience the (consequences of) nuisance caused by such protests and the riot that followed.¹⁰⁴ However, a distinction needs to be made between those who went to participate in a protest against Covid-19 regulations and those who went to cause havoc. As the mayor of The Hague stated: “This has got nothing to do with demonstrating or freedom of speech . . . This group [i.e., the football supporters] was purposefully invested in disrupting public order.”¹⁰⁵ One might argue that Engel is not responsible for these types of violent groups that join peaceful protests of their own accord, however, the actions of such groups could also be seen as a symptom of a wider societal problem to which Engel’s actions contributed—and continue to contribute—negatively.

Before discussing how Engel’s actions contribute to larger societal problems it is first necessary to discuss what those problems are. The Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) conducted research into the ‘different faces of the Covid-19 protestors’ where they explored the motivations of different groups and connected the overall protests to Dutch society. Societal discontent was already present before the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, but the virus contributed to the exacerbation and higher visibility of the existing discontent.¹⁰⁶ At the core of this discontent lies the concept of anti-government extremism, which is defined by Sam Jackson, a scholar of extremism, as “instances of extremism that *primarily* or *consistently* focus on government as a source or cause of perceived crises, where that focus on government is central to the worldviews of the actors in question.”¹⁰⁷ Different motivations for anti-government extremism can be identified and broadly divided into issue-driven and ideological anti-government extremism, differentiated by whether anti-government extremism can be alleviated or completely resolved by means of a change in stance

¹⁰³ “Onrustige dag in Den Haag na betoging op Malieveld: 400 aanhoudingen,” NOS Nieuws, June 21, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2337992-onrustige-dag-in-den-haag-na-betoging-op-malieveld-400-aanhoudingen>.

¹⁰⁴ “Protesten geven overlast, maar niet voor iedereen: ‘Extra ingkocht,’” RTL Nieuws, last modified October 30, 2019, <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/editien/artikel/4902936/bouwprotest-malieveld-den-haag-overlast-profiteren>.

¹⁰⁵ “Onrustige dag in Den Haag na betoging op Malieveld: 400 aanhoudingen,” NOS Nieuws, June 21, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2337992-onrustige-dag-in-den-haag-na-betoging-op-malieveld-400-aanhoudingen>. [Translated from Dutch].

¹⁰⁶ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 6.

¹⁰⁷ Sam Jackson, “What Is Anti-Government Extremism?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185088>.

or policy action—which indicates issue-driven anti-government extremism—or not—indicating ideological anti-government extremism. Noteworthy is that the distinction between issue-driven and ideological is not always clear-cut and that groups centred around ideology may occasionally display issue-driven anti-government extremism as well—sometimes specifically intended to reach and attract a broader audience.¹⁰⁸ Within the larger group of discontented Dutch, the NCTV identified three distinctive motives for anti-government extremism that can be classified as either ideology based or issue-driven. Firstly, the report identified people whose anti-government extremism stems from their political ideology, further divided into far right and far left, based on the political spectrum.¹⁰⁹ In modern history, anti-government extremism was more prevalent amongst the far left, taking the form of an anarchist movement, which “emerged during the second half of the 19th century and . . . the early 20th century,” and rejected the “legitimacy of state authority.”¹¹⁰ Recent years have seen a shift with influential movements now mostly found amongst the far right, where the focus lies on the exclusion of a specific group—often due to race or ethnicity—either from politics, public life, or both.¹¹¹ The far right’s race- or ethnicity-based motivation could also categorise their cause as an issue-based case of anti-government extremism since policies can be made or changed to exclude certain groups; such policies have existed in the past in the form of the United States’ Jim Crow laws, for example. However, as (re)introducing such policies in the Netherlands is not an option due to Article 1 of the Constitution, which safeguards against “[d]iscrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, political opinion, race or sex or any other grounds whatsoever,” it can be argued that the far right’s motivation should be classified as ideological.¹¹² Even though the shift towards the far right being more influential is also visible in the Netherlands, however, both the far left and the far right were not present in such numbers (or at all in the case of the far left) to have played a significant role during Covid-19 protests

¹⁰⁸ Sam Jackson, “What Is Anti-Government Extremism?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185088>.

¹⁰⁹ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 22.

¹¹⁰ Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock, “Anti-Government Extremism: A New Threat?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185087>.

¹¹¹ Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock, “Anti-Government Extremism: A New Threat?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185087>.; Sam Jackson, “What Is Anti-Government Extremism?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185088>.

¹¹² “Artikel 1: Gelijke behandeling en discriminatieverbod,” *De Nederlandse Grondwet*, accessed January 5, 2024, https://www.denederlandsegrondwet.nl/id/vgrnb2er8avw/artikel_1_gelijke_behandeling_en?v=1&ctx=vgrnb2er8avw.

and/or riots.¹¹³ The second group identified by the NCTV can be classified as issue-based anti-government extremism since this group opposed (parts of) the Dutch government's policy related to Covid-19.¹¹⁴ However, even though these policies were subject to change, which would suggest the possibility of resolving the anti-government extremism present amongst this group, the presence of one issue does not negate the presence of other issues.¹¹⁵ One such example of multiple issues existing at once can be found by looking at Engel himself, who turned from a sole focus on Covid-19 regulations as the source of his anti-government sentiment to also objecting environmental policies intended to fight climate change.¹¹⁶ Finally, the third group identified by the NCTV can be classified as ideological anti-government extremism: this group is anti-government not due to certain policies but simply because they are against 'the elite.'¹¹⁷ Who the elite are is not necessarily specified by those using the term, instead the elite, as defined by political scientists Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, is often seen as "one homogenous corrupt group that works against the 'general will' of the people, . . . some shadowy forces [holding] on to illegitimate powers to undermine the voice of the people."¹¹⁸ This narrative of the elite is closely associated with populism as well as (belief in) conspiracy theories: the combination of a "central role of 'the people' in politics" combined with heavy criticism for the elite is "necessary for a discourse to be considered populist" and the narrative of an elite group actively working against the people is arguably a conspiracy theory in and of itself.¹¹⁹ As such, this group is most susceptible to believing and spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation and most likely to be distrustful of the government itself (i.e., not just specific policy matters), science and scientists, and mainstream media—since this is where "[t]he elite may be found."¹²⁰

¹¹³ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 22.

¹¹⁴ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 22-23.

¹¹⁵ Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock, "Anti-Government Extremism: A New Threat?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185087>.

¹¹⁶ "Artikelen," Voorwaarheid, accessed January 2, 2024, <https://voorwaarheid.nl/artikelen/>.

¹¹⁷ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 23.

¹¹⁸ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, eds. Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 503.

¹¹⁹ Bruno Castanho Silva, Federico Vegetti and Levente Littvay, "The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 4 (December 2017): 424, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12270>.

¹²⁰ Kelly Greenhill qtd. in Monica Jimenez, "The Truth About Conspiracy Theories," *Tufts Now*, September 5, 2019, <https://now.tufts.edu/2019/09/05/truth-about-conspiracy-theories.>; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 23.; Bruno Castanho Silva, Federico Vegetti and Levente Littvay, "The Elite Is Up to Something:

The NCTV paid special attention to the role of conspiracy theories, social media, and the combination of both. As also discussed in the first chapter, in a situation that is entirely new and (seemingly) disordered conspiracy theories can contribute to creating a sense of order by explaining why things are the way they are. When simply playing this role of offering a grip on unexplainable events, conspiracy theories are not problematic per se—they can even offer an insight into “the functioning of politics, media or science.”¹²¹ However, even though it was found that the combination of believing in conspiracy theories and experiencing societal discontent does not automatically result in expressing this in violent ways, conspiracy theories can still be dangerous in that they can aggravate the existing “polarisation, hardening and radicalisation” of society.¹²² Ultimately, believing conspiracy theories can negatively impact the democratic rule of law through the creation of an alternate reality: distrusting most—if not all—that is said by the government, science, and mainstream media and instead believing alternatives could result in a situation where “facts to one are fables to the other.”¹²³ When it comes to social media, the dangers are manifold. The combination of the algorithms used and the innate ability to bring different people—and thereby different conspiracy theories and misinformation—into contact results in people easily finding a conspiracy theory that can be tied to their specific form of discontent and, from there, it is easy to fall into other conspiracy theories.¹²⁴ Additionally, these attributes of social media can result in the forming of ‘echo chambers,’ a concept that can be defined as “environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes.”¹²⁵ The danger of the reinforcement of such opinions, beliefs, etc. is that it can lead to (further) polarisation by moving those within the chamber “towards more extreme positions.”¹²⁶ Moreover, the current abilities of social media

Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 4 (December 2017): 425, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12270>.

¹²¹ Kelly Greenhill qtd. in Monica Jimenez, “The Truth About Conspiracy Theories,” *Tufts Now*, September 5, 2019, <https://now.tufts.edu/2019/09/05/truth-about-conspiracy-theories>.; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 24.

¹²² Jelle van Buuren, “Doelwit Den Haag?: complotconstructies en systeemhaar in Nederland 2000-2014,” (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2016), 240-241, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/43818>.; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 24-25.

¹²³ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 25.

¹²⁴ Jelle van Buuren, “Doelwit Den Haag?: complotconstructies en systeemhaar in Nederland 2000-2014,” (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2016), 239; 240, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/43818>.

¹²⁵ Matteo Cinelli et al., “The echo chamber effect on social media,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 9 (February 2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118>.

¹²⁶ Matteo Cinelli et al., “The echo chamber effect on social media,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 9 (February 2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118>.

to spread content very quickly and over a wide area has contributed to the easier spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation to mainstream media—where even more people get exposed to it.¹²⁷ Social media does have one attribute that is somewhat positive: it allows people to share their grievances online and in doing so can function as an outlet, thereby negating the need to publicly share their anger—an action that could potentially lead to violence or destruction.¹²⁸ However, this does not negate another danger of social media: the contributing to the normalising of “(discussing) extra-legal or violent acts” through, for example, spreading hate based on political conspiracy theories and/or misinformation, which could subsequently be seen by many and inspire people willing to go the extra mile (i.e., use violence) to establish their beliefs as the only correct beliefs.¹²⁹ When combining conspiracy theories with social media, some other potential dangers become visible as well. Conspiracy beliefs can influence the way people address certain institutions—mainly governmental, science, healthcare, and media institutions—resulting in the use of threats and/or a threatening tone, with most of the interactions taking place via social media.¹³⁰ The danger hereof lies in its long-term consequences: it can lead to these people no longer being able to do their work properly due to being threatened or harassed which, for example, can lead to politicians becoming less “outspoken on controversial issues” or simply quitting entirely and this may affect people’s trust in and the legitimacy of these institutions—and even the democratic process itself.¹³¹ Tore Bjørgo, a social anthropologist and expert on the extreme right, and Kurt Braddock, specialised in online use of persuasive communication techniques, even go as far as referring to this form of anti-government extremism as outright terrorism, stating that “[t]errorism is not only physical violence but may also involve threats of violence to achieve psychological repercussions beyond the immediate target.”¹³² Furthermore, the NCTV have already identified concrete examples of arrests due to people threatening healthcare

¹²⁷ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 26.; Joseph E. Uscinski, “Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

¹²⁸ Jelle van Buuren, “Doelwit Den Haag?: complotconstructies en systeemhaar in Nederland 2000-2014,” (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2016), 239; 248, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/43818>.

¹²⁹ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 27. [Translated from Dutch].

¹³⁰ Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock, “Anti-Government Extremism: A New Threat?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185087>.

¹³¹ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 11.; Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock, “Anti-Government Extremism: A New Threat?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185087>.

¹³² Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock, “Anti-Government Extremism: A New Threat?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (December 2022): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185087>.

professionals, journalists, or government employees and social media has been used to spread ‘doxing lists’ with personal information—including addresses—of journalists, police officers, and politicians, amongst others.¹³³ Social media also facilitates the intermingling of different groups which has resulted in groups who initially did not share conspiracy beliefs being ‘infected’ with misinformation and subsequently using conspiracy theories to support their discontent. This too has resulted in concrete examples of people threatening politicians with violence and sprouting accusations—both online and in person—based on conspiracy theories (e.g., that politicians were all satanists or part of a ring of paedophiles).¹³⁴ This also shows, once again, how conspiracy theories and misinformation have contributed to the hardening of society and the increased willingness to use force.

Having indicated how Covid-19 has exacerbated and created a higher visibility of already existing societal problems we can now turn towards how Engel’s actions fit into this broader perspective. Firstly, it should be noted that Viruswaarheid is mentioned by name not once but twice in a report by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism; in other words: Engel’s action group is mentioned in a report of a government organisation whose sole purpose is “serv[ing] the Netherlands’ national security: . . . protecting national interests, identify[ing] threats and strengthen[ing] resilience.”¹³⁵ The first mention is as an example of a group seeking legal action to fight Covid-19 regulations, the second mention is as an example of a group acting in way deemed as potentially intimidating: Viruswaarheid sent out letters to about 5.000 general practitioners (GPs) and medical specialists containing misinformation that insinuated they were legally liable for acting in accordance with their profession.¹³⁶ Besides these actions carried out by the group Viruswaarheid, Engel’s personal actions have also contributed negatively. Engel—and in extension his Covid-19-scepticism—had become highly visible in the Dutch landscape early on during the pandemic due to the numerous interviews for independent but freely accessible media channels, his subsequent presence in mainstream media (even if this had a negative undertone), and his continual presence on social media (both X and Facebook). In his incessant spreading of misinformation and distrust regarding the government, mainstream media, and medical and science institutions, Engel became a prime example of someone who contributed to “[t]he becoming commonplace of radical statements

¹³³ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 12.

¹³⁴ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 13.

¹³⁵ NCTV homepage, accessed January 5, 2024, <https://english.nctv.nl/>.

¹³⁶ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 9; 10.

and the systematic sowing of distrust.”¹³⁷ As was shown above, this can have far-reaching consequences for democracy and the rule of law; when looking at people’s comments underneath any of Engel’s interviews the distrust in either government, medical specialists or institutions, mainstream media, or a combination of those is immediately apparent. Additionally, Engel’s protests—organised on behalf of Viruswaarheid—have led to several arrests including his own, whilst also functioning as a temptation for violent individuals, which brought with it the possibility of riots.¹³⁸

As briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph, Viruswaarheid did not just oppose Covid-19 regulations through protests but also through legal action—mostly without success. The first summary proceedings aimed at ending all Covid-19 regulations, as discussed in section 2.2, was lost by Viruswaarheid; as were the two summary proceedings before that, which were intended to reverse the protest bans the government had imposed due to security concerns.¹³⁹ Since those first few summary proceedings, there have currently been around 30 court decisions in cases related to Covid-19 where Viruswaarheid, or Engel personally, was either the lead or a co-plaintiff. Of those cases publicly available, the court has decided in favour of Viruswaarheid just once—a decision that was overruled a mere ten days later but is worth exploring in a bit more detail nonetheless.¹⁴⁰

The Dutch government first announced their plans for a curfew on January 22, 2021, to be implemented starting January 23 and lasting till February 10.¹⁴¹ The curfew led to riots of unknown proportions compared to what the Netherlands had experienced in past decades and coverage of the riots was found on media platforms across numerous countries due to said violence and the length of the riots, which took place three nights in a row.¹⁴² During the riots,

¹³⁷ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 20. [Translated from Dutch].

¹³⁸ Sebastiaan Quekel, “Viruswaarheid-voorman Willem Engel is vrij en wilde direct door naar nieuwe demonstratie,” *AD*, last modified October 12, 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/viruswaarheid-voorman-willem-engel-is-vrij-en-wilde-direct-door-naar-nieuwe-demonstratie~a4e1ae11/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>.

¹³⁹ ANP, “Viruswaan zin verliest kort geding over coronamaatregelen,” *Het Parool*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.parool.nl/nederland/viruswaan-zin-verliest-kort-geding-over-coronamaatregelen~b551d896/>.

¹⁴⁰ Rechtbank Den Haag, “ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2021:1100,” *De Rechtspraak*, February 16, 2021, <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2021:1100&showbutton=true&keyword=Viruswaarheid&idx=12>.

¹⁴¹ Ferdinand Grapperhaus, “Regeling van de Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid van 22 januari 2021, nr. 3192465, tot instelling van een landelijke avondklok ter bestrijding van de epidemie van covid-19 (Tijdelijke regeling landelijke avondklok covid-19),” *Staatscourant*, January 22, 2021, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stert-2021-4191.html#extrainformatie>.

¹⁴² Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 14.

many turned towards vandalism, plundering, or both and many were arrested, which—for some—resulted in time spend in a detention facility and/or high fines.¹⁴³ Thus the reason these riots are relevant is twofold: the first is that the violence displayed during the riots can be tied to the report by the NCTV in the sense that these riots are a plausible result of the normalising of “(discussing) extra-legal or violent acts,” to which Engel (either personally or via Viruswaarheid) had contributed.¹⁴⁴ The second reason is the abovementioned connection to the legal case decided in Viruswaarheid’s favour. On February 9, 2021, the curfew’s end date was extended to March 3, 2021, by means of a temporary arrangement; the problem of the extension, according to Viruswaarheid, was the law used to achieve it, namely the ‘Law on Extraordinary Powers of Civil Authority.’¹⁴⁵ The preliminary relief judge agreed with Viruswaarheid that the State had not met all conditions required to make use of that law and therefore an extension of the curfew was not legally valid and had to be rescinded immediately—a decision made on February 16, 2021, which was quickly overruled and the curfew was soon reinstated.¹⁴⁶

Engel’s public displays of distrust towards the government and other institutions have also impacted Engel himself negatively: in December 2021 a collective report signed by no fewer than 22.500 people was filed accusing Engel of “sedition, spreading medical disinformation, fraud, making statements with a terroristic intent, and making threats.”¹⁴⁷ In January 2022 the Dutch Public Prosecution Service (OM) opened an investigation which led to Engel’s arrest on March 16, 2022, for six counts of sedition.¹⁴⁸ On January 20, 2023, the court concluded that one of those statements was indeed seditious and Engel received a “one-

¹⁴³ “Avondklokrellen hebben politiewerk blijvend veranderd,” NOS Nieuws, January 23, 2022, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2414236-avondklokrellen-hebben-politiewerk-blijvend-veranderd>.

¹⁴⁴ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 27. [Translated from Dutch].

¹⁴⁵ Translated from the Dutch ‘Wet buitengewone bevoegdheden burgerlijk gezag,’ abbreviated as ‘Wbbbg.’

¹⁴⁶ Rechtbank Den Haag, “ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2021:1100,” *De Rechtspraak*, February 16, 2021, [https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2021:1100&showbutton=true&keyword=Viruswaarheid&idx=12.](https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2021:1100&showbutton=true&keyword=Viruswaarheid&idx=12.;); Gerechtshof Den Haag, “ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2021:285.” *De Rechtspraak*, February 26, 2021, <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2021:285&showbutton=true&keyword=Viruswaarheid&idx=15>.

¹⁴⁷ Sebastiaan Quekel and Victor Schildkamp, “Viruswaarheid-voorman Willem engel opgepakt voor opruiing, na een van grootste aangiftes ooit,” *Het Parool*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.parool.nl/nederland/viruswaarheid-voorman-willem-engel-opgepakt-voor-opruiing-na-een-van-grootste-aangiftes-ooit~b7c08951/>. [Translated from Dutch].

¹⁴⁸ Sebastiaan Quekel and Victor Schildkamp, “Viruswaarheid-voorman Willem engel opgepakt voor opruiing, na een van grootste aangiftes ooit,” *Het Parool*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.parool.nl/nederland/viruswaarheid-voorman-willem-engel-opgepakt-voor-opruiing-na-een-van-grootste-aangiftes-ooit~b7c08951/>.

month suspended sentence with a probationary period of two years.”¹⁴⁹ However, both Engel and the OM disagreed with the decision and both parties have filed an appeal with no final decision having been reached as of January 19, 2024.¹⁵⁰ A final case worth mentioning is one filed by Viruswaarheid in which the Dutch ING Bank was served, since this case resulted in Viruswaarheid having to cease their practices—at least for a brief period. The court’s decision meant that ING Bank was now allowed to close Viruswaarheid’s current account which meant that the group was no longer able to receive donations; and since they had not yet managed to open a business current account at another bank, this essentially meant that they could no longer function and thus had to shut down practices—or so Engel and Jeroen Pols said.¹⁵¹ The present status when it comes to the ING Bank court case is that Viruswaarheid’s appeal is drawing closer, set to take place on January 29, 2024.¹⁵² Moreover, Engel and Pols are now active under the new name of ‘Voorwaarheid’ (‘For Truth’) using the same website and the same X account—though these too bear the new name—still spreading the same type of rhetoric as before (i.e., distrust towards the government and other institutions, although the topics currently have a wider range than just Covid-19, now also including a smaller focus on topics such as the European Union, Dutch government more generally, and the environment in relation to climate change) and they are simply continuing any court cases that Viruswaarheid had started before its demise.¹⁵³ Additionally, Engel and his partner Dorien Rose Duinker have started a so-called foundation named ‘Will Do Freedom’ which is invested in much the same as Voorwaarheid claims to be invested in (i.e., freedom [of information], human rights, etc.). Interestingly, neither Voorwaarheid nor the new foundation have managed to open a business current account but via Will Do Freedom people do have the option of donating directly to Engel and Duinker, who state the following on the Will Do Freedom site: “[w]e . . . are still

¹⁴⁹ Rechtbank Rotterdam, “ECLI:NL:RBROT:2023:259,” *De Rechtspraak*, January 20, 2023, <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2023:259&showbutton=true&keyword=Viruswaarheid&idx=35>.

¹⁵⁰ Hessel von Piekartz, “Nederlandse coronascepticus Willem Engel in beroep na veroordeling voor opruiing,” *De Morgen*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.demorgen.be/snelnieuws/nederlandse-coronascepticus-willem-engel-in-beroep-na-veroordeling-voor-opruiing~bab56550/?referrer=https://www.google.com/>; “OM in hoger beroep tegen uitspraak in opruiingszaak Willem Engel,” *NOS Nieuws*, February 2, 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2462191-om-in-hoger-beroep-tegen-uitspraak-in-opruiingszaak-willem-engel>.

¹⁵¹ Rechtbank Amsterdam, “ECLI:NL:RBAMS:2022:5738,” *De Rechtspraak*, October 24, 2022, <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBAMS:2022:5738&showbutton=true&keyword=Viruswaarheid&idx=33>; “Viruswaarheid ‘genoodzaakt’ te stoppen als actiegroep,” *RTL Nieuws*, last modified November 25, 2022, <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/5349301/willem-engel-viruswaarheid-stopt>.

¹⁵² “Juridisch Weekjournaal-Voorbeschouwing ING zaak,” *Videowaarheid*, December 12, 2023, <https://videowaarheid.nl/video/juridisch-weekjournaal-voorbeschouwing-ing-zaak/>.

¹⁵³ Voorwaarheid homepage, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://voorwaarheid.nl/>; “Artikelen,” Voorwaarheid, accessed January 2, 2024, <https://voorwaarheid.nl/artikelen/>.

very much a part of the group that operates under VoorWaarheid . . . [and] since our foundation was denied a bank account, part of our efforts will be sponsoring the court cases.”¹⁵⁴ Taking all this into consideration, it seems as if not much has changed despite the (results of) multiple court cases.

2.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to answer the question of who Willem Engel is and whether his actions with regards to Covid-19 have contributed to societal problems and/or people’s faith in democratic governance in the Netherlands and if so, in what way.

The information in this chapter regarding Engel has painted a picture of someone who has gained a following through sharing his (limited) knowledge and false or incomplete ‘facts,’ which has resulted in a growing feeling of distrust aimed at the government—both the institution and its employees—as well as science, healthcare, and media institutions; no matter whether Engel spread misinformation intentionally or unintentionally, the results are the same. Moreover, Engel has continued to spread misinformation through public appearances on alternative media channels, through his own social media accounts, through the websites Voorwaarheid and Will Do Freedom, and through court cases—with the added exposure in mainstream media when they report on said cases. When it comes to societal problems and Engel’s role in upholding them, the following quote found in the NCTV report succinctly summarises the potential long-term consequences of Engel’s actions: “[t]he becoming commonplace of radical statements and the systematic sowing of distrust can, over time, undermine the legitimacy of politics, governance, and law enforcement. This poses potential risks to social stability and the democratic rule of law.”¹⁵⁵ Although Engel is not exclusively responsible for the above, his actions have contributed—and continue to contribute—to this as well as to the normalising of “(discussing) extra-legal or violent acts.”¹⁵⁶ The mentioned protests, especially the curfew riots of January 2021, exemplify that the ease with which protesters turn to the use of violence has already increased.

¹⁵⁴ “Empower Our Cause: Support and Expand Our International Channel for Freedom,” Will Do Freedom, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://willdofreedom.com/donate/>.

¹⁵⁵ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 20. [Translated from Dutch].

¹⁵⁶ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 27. [Translated from Dutch].

In the next chapter the focus will turn towards the world outside the Netherlands, looking at both the United States and its (potential) influence as well as influences closer to home. This will be explored in two ways: firstly, by studying the connections between Willem Engel, the John Birch Society, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and secondly, by studying the connections between Engel the German Querdenken and the German anti-Covid-19 movement in general as well as the connections between Engel and the European Forum for Vaccine Vigilance.

Chapter 3. Outside Influences: United States vs. Europe

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will turn towards a broader view and look at Willem Engel's connections outside of the Netherlands, answering the sub-question: What connections are there between Willem Engel and non-Dutch purveyors of Covid-19 related misinformation or conspiracy theories and what type of information—if any—is transferred? Based on initial findings, a selection has been made of groups or people that can potentially be linked to Engel personally and/or Viruswaarheid as an organisation. The first section will discuss Engel's links to two American sources of misinformation and/or conspiracy theories, whilst the second section delves into Engel's connections within Europe.

3.2 Engel's Links with the United States: The John Birch Society & Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Both Matthew Dallek—a historian and professor of political management as well as the author of the book *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*—and Edward H. Miller—a political historian specialised in conservatism and the far right and author of *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism*—agree that the John Birch Society has remained influential to this day.¹⁵⁷ This is also where connections to Willem Engel can be found. However, some background information is necessary to understand the relevance of the organisation and how it can be tied to Engel. The John Birch Society (JBS) was founded in 1958 by a group of twelve people—led by Robert Welch, a retired businessman—with the intent to “educate the public about the communist conspiracy that allegedly was stripping Americans of their God-given freedoms.”¹⁵⁸ The men's conspiratorial beliefs as well as their overall views with regards to the government, which were considered to be extreme, put them on the fringes of the right wing on the political spectrum. Despite this, however, they “swam in the warm currents of a . . . centrist cultural life,” holding positions in “esteemed institutions,” delivering talks to churches or Rotary Clubs,

¹⁵⁷ Matthew Dallek, “Introduction: Fringe to Center,” in *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*, (United Kingdom: Hachette UK, 2023).; Edward H. Miller, “Introduction,” in *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 1.

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Dallek, “Chapter 1: ‘God’s Angry Men,’” in *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*, (United Kingdom: Hachette UK, 2023).

and some of the founders even “campaign[ed] for Republican candidates.”¹⁵⁹ Even so, they still held a fear of left-wing ideals that they believed would result in more government involvement, such as a growing welfare state in general and the New Deal in particular or organised labour—all of which would impact the capitalist framework and the ethical principles they held dear.¹⁶⁰ The group felt let down and betrayed by the “[p]owerful elites” and wanted nothing more than to safeguard “the real America—a nation defined by small government, maximum freedom, and a white, Christian populace.”¹⁶¹ During the late 1960s, JBS’s membership decreased, and the organisation was not as influential as it had been in the early 1960s—but it did not disappear.¹⁶² JBS, particularly its main founder Robert Welch, remained active and, according to Miller, JBS even played “a decisive role in establishing the rightward terminus of conservative opinion in the 1970s.”¹⁶³ In the last several years, too, we have seen a resurgence of JBS’ “political ideas and attitudes,” with politicians like Trump exemplifying this in his usage of conspiracy theories and a focus on ‘America first’ in his rhetoric.¹⁶⁴ Ultimately, the importance of JBS in the United States can be found in the role it played in reshaping conservatism and moving the Republican party from a moderately right to a far-right position through an approach of “conspiracy theories, and a more apocalyptic, violent, [anti-establishment] mode of politics.”¹⁶⁵

First indications that there might be links between Engel and JBS were reported by Dutch (investigative) journalists Peter Keizer, Anoek Hofkens, and Wouter Hoek—whose article was published by Pointer, a component of public service broadcaster KRO-NCRV that focuses on investigative journalism—in cooperation with Alexander Beuder and Laudy van den Heuvel—whose article was published in opinion magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁹ Matthew Dallek, “Chapter 1: ‘God’s Angry Men,’” in *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*, (United Kingdom: Hachette UK, 2023).

¹⁶⁰ Matthew Dallek, “Chapter 1: ‘God’s Angry Men,’” in *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*, (United Kingdom: Hachette UK, 2023).; Jarrod Shanahan and Tyler Wall, “‘Fight the reds, support the blue’: Blue Lives Matter and the US counter-subversive tradition,” *Race & Class* 63, no. 1 (July-September 2021): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03063968211010998>.

¹⁶¹ Matthew Dallek, “Chapter 1: ‘God’s Angry Men,’” in *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*, (United Kingdom: Hachette UK, 2023).

¹⁶² Edward H. Miller, “Introduction,” in *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 10.

¹⁶³ Edward H. Miller, “Introduction,” in *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 10.

¹⁶⁴ Matthew Dallek, “Introduction: Fringe to Center,” in *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*, (United Kingdom: Hachette UK, 2023).

¹⁶⁵ Matthew Dallek, “Introduction: Fringe to Center,” in *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*, (United Kingdom: Hachette UK, 2023).

¹⁶⁶ Peter Keizer, Anoek Hofkens and Wouter Hoek, “Complotdenkers strijden met Amerikaanse lobbyclub en Kennedy-telg tegen coronamaatregelen,” Pointer, January 5, 2021, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/complotdenkers-strijden-met-amerikaanse-lobbyclub-en-kennedy-telg-tegen-coronamaatregelen>.; Alexander Beuder and Laudy

However, the evidence Keizer, Hofkens, and Hoek use to argue for a link between JBS and Engel does not seem very substantive. The only ‘direct’ link between Engel and JBS that is described is a link through Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—more on him in the next section—but whether Kennedy can be linked to JBS is not satisfactorily proven as fact: the main evidence is Kennedy’s presence in a Zoom meeting with G. Edward Griffin—who has, in fact, been a fervent JBS member since the 1960s—but his presence alone does not proof Kennedy’s link to JBS, especially since they were not the only people present.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, other links made between Engel and JBS are similarly indirect; former journalist Karel Beckman, who is Dutch, is mentioned, for example, since his name was present on Griffin’s site and he has written for Viruswaarheid’s site, therefore, the journalists argue, he forms a link between Engel and JBS. However, this link specifically has led to the Netherlands Press Council—an independent foundation “charged with the examination of complaints against violations of good journalistic practice”—concluding that the connections the journalists reported were too insubstantial and therefore not sufficiently proven as fact.¹⁶⁸ Still, this does not mean that no connection exists between Engel and JBS. Instead, it means that the connection between Engel and the organisation is more indirect and based more so on JBS’ legacy of publicising conspiratorial ‘facts’ on privately owned, non-mainstream media channels—something Engel has most certainly done (e.g., Engel’s interviews on Café Weltschmerz).¹⁶⁹ Although the Pointer article’s links between Engel and JBS are not very solid, both this article and the one in *De Groene Amsterdammer* provide somewhat more substantial evidence for links between Engel and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (RFK Jr.) is the nephew of former president John F. Kennedy, son of former New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy Sr., and has now joined the 2024 presidential election campaign as an independent candidate with a slogan that states, amongst other things: “We will . . . clean up government, . . . and tell Americans the truth.”¹⁷⁰ The ‘truth’ that is

van den Heuvel, “‘Dat is allemaal bewezen,’” *De Groene Amsterdammer*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/dat-is-allemaal-bewezen>.

¹⁶⁷ Peter Keizer, Aniek Hofkens and Wouter Hoek, “Complotdenkers strijden met Amerikaanse lobbyclub en Kennedy-telg tegen coronamaatregelen,” *Pointer*, January 5, 2021, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/complotdenkers-strijden-met-amerikaanse-lobbyclub-en-kennedy-telg-tegen-coronamaatregelen>.

¹⁶⁸ “English,” Raad voor de Journalistiek, accessed January 10, 2024, [https://www.rvdj.nl/english.](https://www.rvdj.nl/english.;); Peter Keizer, Aniek Hofkens and Wouter Hoek, “Complotdenkers strijden met Amerikaanse lobbyclub en Kennedy-telg tegen coronamaatregelen,” *Pointer*, January 5, 2021, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/complotdenkers-strijden-met-amerikaanse-lobbyclub-en-kennedy-telg-tegen-coronamaatregelen>.

¹⁶⁹ Bart Verhoeven, “Het complot tegen de waarheid: de John Birch Society,” *apache*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.apache.be/2022/01/26/complot-tegen-waarheid-john-birch-society>.

¹⁷⁰ Kennedy24 homepage, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.kennedy24.com>.

referred to is that the CDC, the Food and Drug Administration, and the National Institutes of Health are controlled by pharma, to name just one example, a line of thought that fits with earlier actions by RFK Jr.¹⁷¹ Namely, RFK Jr. “has pursued a high-profile anti-vaccination agenda” starting in the second half of the 1990s.¹⁷² Since at least 2005, RFK Jr. has been using conspiracy theories or other misinformation to support his argument against (certain) vaccines and health care institutions more generally, “alleg[ing] that elites control medical research [and] falsify scientific findings”—allegations quite similar to the ones by Engel regarding the RIVM’s findings on Covid-19 as discussed in section 2.3.¹⁷³ RFK Jr. also founded the Children’s Health Defense (CHD) in 2016, “a public health advocacy organisation dedicated to ending exposure to neurotoxic mercury in fish, medical products, dental amalgams and vaccines,” (i.e., thimerosal).¹⁷⁴ Moreover, in a 2015 book (*Thimerosal: Let the Science Speak*) as well as in a 2021 film (*Medical Racism: The New Apartheid*) RFK Jr. has made insinuations or outright claims that certain developmental disorders, such as Attention Deficit Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ADS), can be linked to certain vaccines or vaccine ingredients, such as thimerosal—something that has been disproven in many studies, some of which focused specifically on the abovementioned thimerosal and dating as far back as 2001.¹⁷⁵ Then, during the Covid-19 pandemic, RFK Jr. continued sharing his conspiracy theories, now tied specifically to the pandemic, calling out Dr Anthony Fauci—former Chief Medical Advisor to the President—as well as Bill Gates—co-founder of Microsoft Corporations and 6th richest person in the world—for their supposed role in “a corrupt medical industry complex” as well

¹⁷¹ “Honest Government,” Kennedy24, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.kennedy24.com/honest>.

¹⁷² “Robert F. Kennedy,” John F. Kennedy Library, accessed January 11, 2024, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy>.; “Life of John F. Kennedy,” John F. Kennedy Library, accessed January 11, 2024, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy>.; Stephanie Alice Baker, Eugene McLaughlin and Chris Rojek, Simple solutions to wicked problems: Cultivating true believers of anti-vaccine conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 0, no. 0 (May 2023): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231173536>.

¹⁷³ Stephanie Alice Baker, Eugene McLaughlin and Chris Rojek, Simple solutions to wicked problems: Cultivating true believers of anti-vaccine conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 0, no. 0 (May 2023): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231173536>.

¹⁷⁴ Stephanie Alice Baker, Eugene McLaughlin and Chris Rojek, Simple solutions to wicked problems: Cultivating true believers of anti-vaccine conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 0, no. 0 (May 2023): 6; 11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231173536>.

¹⁷⁵ Stephanie Alice Baker, Eugene McLaughlin and Chris Rojek, Simple solutions to wicked problems: Cultivating true believers of anti-vaccine conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 0, no. 0 (May 2023): 9; 11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231173536>.; “Vaccine Safety: Autism,” CDC, accessed January 11, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/autism.html>.; “Vaccines and ADHD,” Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, accessed January 11, 2024, <https://www.chop.edu/centers-programs/vaccine-education-center/vaccines-and-other-conditions/add-adhd>.

as their “Formidable Nefarious Partnership”; all of which would ultimately lead to a “Global Elite . . . master[ing] the Future.”¹⁷⁶

On August 28, 2020, RFK Jr.—along with several others—announced a European branch of the CHD—that would go on to sow doubt and confusion about Covid-19 vaccines—along with a rally at which RFK Jr. would speak to be held on August 29 in Berlin.¹⁷⁷ During said talk, RFK Jr. once again shared all kinds of conspiracy theories, such as Bill Gates having used the lockdown during the pandemic—itsself supposedly planned by some elite—to introduce 5G to spy on people.¹⁷⁸ This rally and speech in Berlin is also where some links of direct contact with both Engel and Viruswaarheid can be found. Engel shared RFK Jr. Instagram post in which he announced his presence in Berlin—a post rife with conspiracy theories, again mentioning Bill Gates as well as “the Pharma sponsored coup d’état against liberal democracy”—posting this on his own Facebook page with the message: “F*cking epic.”¹⁷⁹ Moreover, Engel, as well as a group of Viruswaarheid members, joined the march preceding RFK Jr.’s talk as well as the talk itself, with Engel sharing pictures of his attendance on his Facebook page.¹⁸⁰ A delegation of Viruswaarheid members, including Engel, subsequently met with RFK Jr. in the hotel both groups happened to be staying in and it was confirmed that Viruswaarheid would help RFK Jr. to introduce the European branch of CHD

¹⁷⁶ Stephanie Alice Baker, Eugene McLaughlin and Chris Rojek, Simple solutions to wicked problems: Cultivating true believers of anti-vaccine conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 0, no. 0 (May 2023): 9; 11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231173536>; “The Top 10 Richest People In The World (January 2024),” *Forbes*, last modified December 1, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeswealthteam/article/the-top-ten-richest-people-in-the-world/?sh=1812068554dc>.

¹⁷⁷ “Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Press Conference in Berlin After Launching CHD’s Europe Chapter,” Children’s Health Defense, August 28, 2020, <https://childrenshealthdefense.org/news/robert-f-kennedy-jr-holds-a-press-conference-in-berlin-after-launching-chds-europe-chapter/>; Peter Keizer, Alexander Loeb and Mark Jan van Tellingem, “Factcheck: Kennedy’s campagne tegen coronavaccins,” Pointer, March 9, 2021, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/Kennedys-campagne-tegen-coronavaccins>.

¹⁷⁸ Peter Keizer, Anoek Hofkens and Wouter Hoek, “Complotdenkers strijden met Amerikaanse lobbyclub en Kennedy-telg tegen coronamaatregelen,” Pointer, January 5, 2021, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/complotdenkers-strijden-met-amerikaanse-lobbyclub-en-kennedy-telg-tegen-coronamaatregelen>.

¹⁷⁹ Robert F. Kennedy qtd. in Willem Engel, “Fucking epic,” Facebook, August 28, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10157383146652665&set=a.10150163647367665>; Willem Engel, “Fucking epic,” Facebook, August 28, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10157383146652665&set=a.10150163647367665>.

¹⁸⁰ Peter Keizer, Anoek Hofkens and Wouter Hoek, “Complotdenkers strijden met Amerikaanse lobbyclub en Kennedy-telg tegen coronamaatregelen,” Pointer, January 5, 2021, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/complotdenkers-strijden-met-amerikaanse-lobbyclub-en-kennedy-telg-tegen-coronamaatregelen>; Willem Engel, “Kennedy Will take care of our US branch of virus truth.(people please this is with a wink. we wish mr Kennedy all the best with his efforts which align very closely with ours. We hope that we will have a beautiful cooperation in the future together with Children’s defense force),” Facebook, August 30, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10157387185837665&set=a.10150163647367665&type=3&theater>.

in Europe; and, indeed, one of Viruswaarheid's jurists, Charlie de Vreede, started to assist with the establishment of the European branch.¹⁸¹

3.3 European Connections & Germany as a Source of Inspiration

Viruswaarheid was not the only group to have helped with the foundation of CHD Europe; two other European groups, both known either for their Covid-19 scepticism, their anti-vaccination stance, or both, were identified as having helped as well—these being the German 'Querdenken' movement¹⁸² ('Lateral Thinking') and the European Forum for Vaccine Vigilance.¹⁸³ Querdenken initially started out as a singular protest taking place in Stuttgart in March 2020, which was organised by Michael Ballweg and was in opposition of the lockdown.¹⁸⁴ The movement subsequently grew to become a nationwide movement and protests were organised all over Germany with the group now "dominat[ing] protest against containment policies."¹⁸⁵ At that point, the group had become quite similar to what Viruswaarheid would turn out to be, both in terms of their goals and in terms of what happened at protests. Both Engel and Ballweg are known for emphasising their peaceful intentions when it comes to organising protests against Covid-19 regulations, but both have had protests organised by them turn into riots that necessitated police action to break up the violence—and both have criticised the police afterwards.¹⁸⁶ Querdenken and Viruswaarheid also share their distrust of the government, mainstream media, and health institutions, instead preferring

¹⁸¹ Pointer, January 5, 2021, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/complotdenkers-strijden-met-amerikaanse-lobbyclub-en-kennedy-telg-tegen-coronamaatregelen.>; Andreas Kouwenhoven and Wilmer Heck, "Hoe het Duits coronaprotest naar Nederland overwaaide," *NRC*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/10/21/hoehet-duits-coronaprotest-naar-nederland-overwaaide-a4016809>.

¹⁸² Members of the group call themselves 'Querdenker' ('lateral thinker') which is why both terms can be found in texts written about the group.

¹⁸³ Peter Keizer, Esther Chavannes and Mark Jan van Tellingen, "Burgerprotest Brussel campagne van antivaxers," Pointer, January 21, 2022, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/burgerprotest-brussel-campagne-van-antivaxers-kennedy>.

¹⁸⁴ Rémi Almodt, "From criticism to conspiracies: The populist discourse of COVID-19 sceptics in Germany's Querdenken community on Telegram," *Discourse & Society* 35, no. 1 (2024): 5, <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/09579265231191971>.; Marcel Fürstenau, "Germany's Querdenken COVID protest movement," *Deutsche Welle*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/meet-germanys-querdenker-covid-protest-movement/a-57049985>.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Plümper, Eric Neumayer and Katharina Gabriela Pfaff, "The strategy of protest against Covid-19 containment policies in Germany," *Social Science Quarterly* 102 (September 2021): 2236, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13066>.

¹⁸⁶ Marcel Fürstenau, "Germany's Querdenken COVID protest movement," *Deutsche Welle*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/meet-germanys-querdenker-covid-protest-movement/a-57049985>.; Christy Dollen, "Demonstratie op Malieveld tegen politiegeweld, Willem Engel spreekt menigte toe," *AD*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.ad.nl/den-haag/demonstratie-op-malieveld-tegen-politiegeweld-willem-engel-spreekt-menigte-toe~ad61a35a/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>.

alternative media and they have in common their tendency to rely on misinformation to argue against Covid-19 regulations.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, the two groups even share their presence on the radar of a government organisation intended to safeguard national safety, with Querdenken having been put “under surveillance by domestic intelligence in its home state of Baden-Württemberg” in December 2021, whilst Viruswaarheid was discussed in a report by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (section 2.4).¹⁸⁸ The mentioned similarities could be coincidental, as both stem from a dissatisfaction with government regulations for a situation that could not have been foreseen. However, clear evidence exists that inextricably link Engel to Querdenken; this is not related to misinformation or conspiracy theories directly but instead has to do with the techniques used to spread the groups’ beliefs—which itself do, at least partially, rest on misinformation and/or conspiracy theories. Namely, after Jeroen Pols had read information about cases being filed against the German government to fight Covid-19 regulations, Pols decided to implement the same technique in the Netherlands—which ultimately led to Viruswaarheid being founded. Engel and Pols subsequently decided to get in touch with Querdenken and Pols admitted that the groups decided to communicate regularly to exchange “information and ideas” on what to do.¹⁸⁹

Besides links to Querdenken specifically, two other examples exist of Engel and Pols transferring techniques used in Germany to further their own agenda in the Netherlands. Firstly, there is the “campaign against the Covid-19 test,” perhaps better known as the PCR-test, where PCR stands for “polymerase chain reaction.”¹⁹⁰ Viruswaarheid—after having seen similar actions in Germany—decided to file summary proceedings against the government for their use of the PCR-tests, claiming the tests were unreliable and used improperly.¹⁹¹ However, the final decision was not in Viruswaarheid’s favour as their claims were simply incorrect: unlike Viruswaarheid’s claims, the government knew that a positive PCR-test did not equal a medical

¹⁸⁷ Marcel Fürstenau, “Germany’s Querdenken COVID protest movement,” Deutsche Welle, March 4, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/meet-germanys-querdenker-covid-protest-movement/a-57049985>; “The anti-vax movement targeting German children,” BBC, April 13, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-56675874>.

¹⁸⁸ Marcel Fürstenau, “Germany’s Querdenken COVID protest movement,” Deutsche Welle, March 4, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/meet-germanys-querdenker-covid-protest-movement/a-57049985>.

¹⁸⁹ Andreas Kouwenhoven and Wilmer Heck, “Hoe het Duits coronaprotest naar Nederland overwaaide,” *NRC*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/10/21/hoer-het-duits-coronaprotest-naar-nederland-overwaaide-a4016809>.

¹⁹⁰ Andreas Kouwenhoven and Wilmer Heck, “Hoe het Duits coronaprotest naar Nederland overwaaide,” *NRC*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/10/21/hoer-het-duits-coronaprotest-naar-nederland-overwaaide-a4016809>; Lotte van Rosmalen, “Hoe betrouwbaar is de PCR-test?” *VPRO*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.vpro.nl/argos/lees/onderwerpen/corona-debunker/2020/betrouwbaarheid-pcr-test.html>.

¹⁹¹ Andreas Kouwenhoven and Wilmer Heck, “Hoe het Duits coronaprotest naar Nederland overwaaide,” *NRC*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/10/21/hoer-het-duits-coronaprotest-naar-nederland-overwaaide-a4016809>.

diagnosis and therefore did not treat it as such; moreover, the fact that there may be false positives (i.e., the test falsely indicating the presence of virus particles) or false negatives (i.e., the test incorrectly indicating a lack of virus particles present) did not mean “that the tests . . . could not be used to detect the presence of Covid-19 particles,” as this was still in accordance with manufacturer’s instructions, unlike Viruswaarheid’s claims.¹⁹² The final example of ideas transferred from Germany has to do with the mask mandate. The government announced a mask mandate on November 30, 2020—to be implemented the following day—which held that everyone over the age of 12 had to wear a mask when in public spaces; Viruswaarheid did not agree with these new regulations and tried to limit them as much as possible.¹⁹³ Following German examples, Viruswaarheid shared a template people could use to *wrongfully* claim they could not wear a mask in public transport due to a medical condition. Subsequently, “a psychiatrist and GP affiliated to Viruswaarheid were reprimanded” for granting such wrongful claims.¹⁹⁴

The European Forum for Vaccine Vigilance (EFVV) is “an alliance of member-organisation and individual members from 25 European countries” whose goal it is to “[p]rovide information on the adverse effects of vaccination,” amongst other things.¹⁹⁵ However, when further delving into the information provided on the official EFVV site, it quickly becomes evident that at least part of the information they are sharing is actually *misinformation*: here too, as with RFK Jr., a causal relationship is reported between vaccines and ASD even though such a connection does not exist.¹⁹⁶ The EFVV having played a role in the founding of CHD Europe exemplifies their role in the European anti-Covid-19 movement—and the anti-vaccination movement more generally: this is an organisation that is active behind the scenes and that plays a role in connecting different European action groups, providing them with

¹⁹² Rechtbank Den Haag, “De Staat hoeft gebruik PCR-test niet te staken en hoeft communicatie over het coronavirus niet aan te passen,” De Rechtspraak, December 9, 2020, <https://www.rechtspraak.nl/Organisatie-en-contact/Organisatie/Rechtbanken/Rechtbank-Den-Haag/Nieuws/Paginas/De-Staat-hoeft-gebruik-PCR-test-niet-te-staken-en-hoeft-communicatie-over-het-coronavirus-niet-aan-te-passen.aspx>; Marc J.M. Bonten, “Covid-19: een fout-positieve PCR-testuitslag,” NTVG, September 26, 2020, <https://www.ntvg.nl/artikelen/covid-19-een-fout-positieve-pcr-testuitslag>.

¹⁹³ “Tijdelijke wet maatregelen COVID-19 gaat in,” Rijksoverheid, November 30, 2020, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/11/30/tijdelijke-wet-maatregelen-covid-19-gaat-in>.

¹⁹⁴ Andreas Kouwenhoven and Wilmer Heck, “Hoe het Duits coronaprotest naar Nederland overwaaide,” *NRC*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/10/21/hoehetduitscoronaprotestnaarnederland-overwaaide-a4016809>.

¹⁹⁵ “About us,” EFVV, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.efvv.eu/about/about-us>.

¹⁹⁶ “AVA Alicia Capilla,” EFVV, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.efvv.eu/about/honorary-members/ava-alicia-capilla>.

“information, morale, lobbying, funding or other resources, ideas and tools.”¹⁹⁷ In fact, the EFVV have been active since 1998 and had already collaborated with RFK Jr. on multiple occasions before the Covid-19 pandemic started and the focus turned more towards Covid-19 and its vaccines. A first recent example is the open letter sent to the WHO in 2018 arguing for more research to be carried out before approving vaccines, highlighting their position against mandatory vaccination, and reiterating their belief that a causal relationship exists between vaccines and ASD as well as other chronic illnesses and immune diseases.¹⁹⁸ A supposed causal relationship between ASD and vaccines has already been disputed above and a wealth of scientific evidence exists that also refutes these other claims.¹⁹⁹ A second example is the demonstration against mandatory vaccination that was planned to take place on March 21, 2020, in Munich, Germany—a demonstration that was cancelled due to Covid-19 regulations.²⁰⁰

Whilst the focus so far has been on anti-vaccination groups and organisations whose motivations are based—at least partially—on misinformation or simply undeniable conspiracy theories, it is important to note that “reasons for vaccine refusal are complex and differ according to geographical and cultural context.”²⁰¹ One study, based in the United States, found four overarching categories for why people can be hesitant, namely, “religious reasons, personal beliefs or philosophical reasons, safety concerns, and a desire for more information from healthcare providers.”²⁰² Therefore, it is important not to classify people one disagrees with—both within the broader debate on vaccinations as well as within the debate on misinformation and conspiracy theories related to Covid-19—as a ‘conspiracy theorist’ without reasonable evidence that supports this theory.

As the abovementioned examples indicate, although the collaboration between RFK Jr. and the EFVV is nothing new, it did intensify during the pandemic with the foundation of the European branch of the CHD. This was subsequently followed by the foundation of the World

¹⁹⁷ “About EFVV,” EFVV, accessed January 14, 2024, <https://efvv.eu>.

¹⁹⁸ “Open brief van internationale organisaties aan de WHO over het onderwerp vaccinveiligheid,” Stichting Vaccinvrij, September 20, 2018, <https://stichtingvaccinvrij.nl/open-brief-van-internationale-organisaties-aan-de-who-over-het-onderwerp-vaccinveiligheid/>.

¹⁹⁹ Sarah Geoghegan, Kevin P. O’Callaghan and Paul A. Offit, “Vaccine Safety: Myths and Misinformation,” *Frontiers in Microbiology* 11 (March 2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2020.00372>.

²⁰⁰ “Invitation to european protest for medical freedom,” EFVV, accessed January 14, 2024, <https://efvv.eu/events/munich-protest>.

²⁰¹ Sarah Geoghegan, Kevin P. O’Callaghan and Paul A. Offit, “Vaccine Safety: Myths and Misinformation,” *Frontiers in Microbiology* 11 (March 2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2020.00372>.

²⁰² Chephra McKee and Kristin Bohannon, “Exploring the Reasons Behind Parental Refusal of Vaccines,” *The Journal of Pediatric Pharmacology and Therapeutics* 21, no. 2 (April 2016): 104, <https://doi.org/10.5863/1551-6776-21.2.104>.

Doctors Alliance, which is “a group of European doctors (often suspended or with irrelevant specialisations) who oppose the scientific consensus on Covid-19.”²⁰³ The information on which this foundation bases their arguments is not necessarily factual, however. When looking at the twelve doctors involved in the foundation, for example, we see Dutch GP Elke De Klerk who is known for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories about Covid-19, such as stating “that the vaccines contained nanoparticles” that will make anyone who is vaccinated “property of Microsoft.”²⁰⁴ Moreover, doctors within the Alliance have made claims that “are unaligned and even contradict one another;” there is not even a clear consensus on whether Covid-19 is real, with some doctors denying its existence whilst others are simply not convinced of its severity but do acknowledge the virus as real.²⁰⁵

3.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to answer the question what connections there are between Willem Engel and non-Dutch organisations that share misinformation or conspiracy theories related to Covid-19, whilst also looking at what type of information—if any—was shared between Engel and these organisations.

Based on initial findings, a total of four organisations were discussed in this chapter—the John Birch Society, Robert F. Kenney Jr. and his Children’s Health Defense, the European Forum for Vaccine Vigilance, and the German Querdenken—and based on further information discussed in this chapter, it can be said that different degrees of connections exist, which has resulted in different types of information being transferred. Supposed connections between JBS and Engel turned out to be based on insufficient evidence, however, delving into the background of the organisation showed that indirect connections may still be relevant. Namely, the influence JBS has had on the overall political field, with the organisation being partially responsible for the slow move within the Republican party to the far-right, its use of populism, and the normalising of the use of conspiracy theories on privately owned media channels. All have had long lasting repercussions that are now visible in Engel’s actions as well. Compared

²⁰³ Peter Keizer, Esther Chavannes and Mark Jan van Tellinggen, “Burgerprotest Brussel campagne van antivaxers,” Pointer, January 21, 2022, <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/burgerprotest-brussel-campagne-van-antivaxers-kennedy>.

²⁰⁴ Aoife Gallagher, Mackenzie Hart and Ciarán O’Connor, “Ill Advice: A Case Study in Facebook’s Failure to Tackle COVID-19 Disinformation,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2021): 24, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Ill-Advice_v3.pdf.

²⁰⁵ Aoife Gallagher, Mackenzie Hart and Ciarán O’Connor, “Ill Advice: A Case Study in Facebook’s Failure to Tackle COVID-19 Disinformation,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2021): 7, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Ill-Advice_v3.pdf.

to JBS, a more direct link was found between Engel and both RFK Jr.—and CHD—as well as the EFVV, although both links are still somewhat tangential. RFK Jr. has, and continues to play, an important role in linking American and European organisations and has been very influential in the anti-vaccination movement that already existed before the Covid-19 pandemic began. Additionally, it is interesting how Engel's allegations against the RIVM (i.e., allegedly falsifying scientific results) are so very similar to RFK Jr.'s claims he has been making since 2005. EFVV plays a similar role to RFK Jr.'s CHD, but even less evidence exists of direct links between Engel and this organisation besides their shared participation in the foundation of the European branch of CHD. The clearest and most direct links were found between Engel and Querdenken, as well as with the German anti-Covid-19 movement in general. Engel and Pols have had close personal contact with the founder(s) of Querdenken to discuss ideas, indicating a close degree of connection. Furthermore, clear examples exist of Engel and Pols taking German ideas and using them to reach their own goals for Viruswaarheid in the Netherlands. All in all, this shows how a closer degree of connection results in the transfer of more (concrete) ideas.

The next chapter will conclude this research answering the main research question and discussing what it means for the broader field of Cultural Transfer and the debate surrounding globalisation vs. Americanisation, also providing a number of suggestions for further research.

Conclusion

As was discussed in the introduction, the overarching purpose of this research was to answer the following research question: In what way has misinformation—including conspiracy theories—related to Covid-19 spread to and from the rhetoric of Willem Engel and how does this relate to the debate on globalisation vs. Americanisation? Using the information gathered and set out in chapters 1 to 3, it is now possible to answer this question and discuss the wider implications of the findings for the broader field of Cultural Transfer.

Chapter 1 dealt with the concepts that were relevant for this research—those being cultural transfer, Americanisation, globalisation, misinformation, and conspiracy theory—and it was established that most, if not all, definitions can differ depending on the field of study or even the scholar, although it was established that one important characteristic of Cultural Transfer is that “any cultural [product] transferred between different cultures . . . undergoes a process of transformation, or re-semanticization, [and] re-interpretation.”²⁰⁶ However, the evidence found does not support the presence of this characteristic of Cultural Transfer. Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that the Internet has indeed made it nigh impossible to differentiate the origins of specific different conspiracy theories or other types of misinformation. Still, transfer of other types of information did clearly occur, with Chapter 3 showing how Engel took a lot of inspiration from the German anti-Covid-19 movement: discussing ideas with the group Querdenken and taking ideas from the German movement in general to be implemented in the Netherlands, such as the use of the law to fight regulations or encouraging people to apply for exemption on the mask mandate when it is not warranted. These examples tell several things about the type of transfer that took place: first, the typical agent-recipient relationship was not detected, instead a relationship similar to Fluck’s conceptualisation of self-Americanisation was present but instead of America being the source, Germany’s anti-Covid-19 movement served as the source and Engel as the willing recipient taking in cultural products. Conversely, the example of Querdenken and Viruswaarheid exchanging ideas completely takes away any notion of an agent-recipient relationship and instead suggests a mutual cooperation in which power dynamics are entirely absent. Secondly the instances of transfer that took place between Germany and Engel were instances where no transformation occurred, something that

²⁰⁶ Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach,” in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered: Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, eds. Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 2.

could have far reaching consequences for the field of Cultural Transfer, since the notion of a cultural product undergoing some sort of transformation has lied at the core of Cultural Transfer for many years now. One hypothesis that could explain this finding is that German and Dutch cultures are similar enough to not necessitate a transformation of (certain) transferred cultural products. Further research investigating this phenomenon should be conducted, however, as the scope of this research is too limited to formulate well substantiated explanations for this finding.

Although convincing evidence supporting direct links between Engel and the investigated American organisations (i.e., the John Birch Society and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and his Children’s Health Defense) was not found, this does not categorically negate the possibility of information transference taking place between Engel and the United States. The similarities between RFK Jr.’s approach used in the 2000s and Engel’s approach in 2020 (i.e., insinuating science institutions’ falsifying of information), for example, could indicate a flow of information that was simply not identified in this research. Moreover, RFK Jr.’s role in the global anti-vaccination movement, especially considering the collaborations between him and the European Forum for Vaccine Vigilance make it highly likely that information has been flowing—and will continue to flow—between Europe and the United States. Still, the scope of this research is a definite limitation and further research should focus not just on the transfer of practical ideas of how to spread misinformation but also—or only—on the actual misinformation itself. To fully chart the flow of misinformation to and from Engel, his entire digital presence should be considered: not just Engel’s personal X account, but also his Viruswaarheid X account, his Facebook account, the multiple websites, and his presence in alternative media that is not owned by himself—some of which are no longer active but only exist in Internet archives. Only then is there a possibility of fully identifying the network of misinformation that exists between Engel, the United States, and other non-Dutch sources.

Considering all this, the yet to be answered question regarding where Engel’s case study can be placed within the debate on globalisation vs. Americanisation can now be answered as well. Namely, Engel’s case study firmly fits within the broader concept of globalisation as defined by Jan Aart Scholte, who states that “globalisation [is] the spread of transplanetary—and in recent times also more particularly supraterritorial—connections between people.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Jan Aart Scholte, “Defining Globalisation,” *The World Economy* 31, no. 11 (2008): 1478, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9701.2007.01019.x>.

The Berlin rally mentioned in section 3.2 provides additional support for this conclusion: people from across Europe as well as the United States all came together to share their beliefs. Besides the question on globalisation vs. Americanisation and the wider implications of this research for the field of Cultural Transfer, there is one final important aspect that this research touched upon: the effect of misinformation and conspiracy theories on (faith in) democratic governance and the role of social media within all this. Engel has used social media to spread misinformation, which has contributed to the spread of distrust against the government as well as science, healthcare, and mainstream media institutions, whilst also contributing to the normalising of “(discussing) extra-legal or violent acts.”²⁰⁸ The findings in this research have indicated that this can negatively impact (faith in) democratic governance over time and it can be inferred that something needs to be done to severely limit the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. The question of how to control this, however, is one that is more difficult to answer as the line between containing misinformation and partaking in censorship can be quite thin. Important to consider is the role played by social media businesses such as X or Meta (Facebook and Instagram): do they hold responsibility, and, if so, to what extent?

All in all, the fact that something needs to be done to fight the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories cannot be denied, the only question is: where do we start?

²⁰⁸ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten* (Den Haag: NCTV, April 2021), 27. [Translated from Dutch].

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Appendix. Essay Cover Sheet

MA TRANSATLANTIC STUDIES

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Name of student and student number: Caya Freriksen